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Class and Esotericism



Guest editors
Tjalling D. Janssen
Misha Kakabadze
Mriganka Mukhopadhyay

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Layout by Studio Sinjin Li.

Editorial contacts

Editors-in-chief

Aren Roukema: aren.roukema@correspondencesjournal.com

Justine Bakker: justine.bakker@correspondencesjournal.com

Jimmy Elwing: jimmy.elwing@correspondencesjournal.com

Associate Editors

Keith Cantú: keith.cantu@correspondencesjournal.com

Tommy Cowan: tommy.cowan@correspondencesjournal.com

Book Review Editors

Naamleela Free Jones: naamleela.free.jones@correspondencesjournal.com

Mriganka Mukhopadhyay: mriganka.mukhopadhyay@correspondencesjournal.com

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Exploring Class in the Study of Esotericism

Misha Kakabadze

mikheil.kakabadze@rel.su.se

Tjalling D. Janssen

t.d.janssen@uva.nl

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;¹ 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.²

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).³ 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.⁴

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.

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 esotericism⁵—a sociological work on occultism by Danny Jorgensen appeared, with a focus on tarot.⁶ 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.”⁷ 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

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.”⁸

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.⁹ In doing so, it responds to the social question of labor hazards in the feudal Holy Roman Empire through medical and cosmological speculation.¹⁰ Rosen writes that “such diseases are the result of

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.”¹¹

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.¹² In the film, we mainly find a *völkisch* representation of “the people,” undergirded by racial homogeneity at the expense of the social category of

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.¹³ 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.¹⁴

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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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."¹⁷

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.¹⁸ 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.

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.”¹⁹ 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.”²⁰ 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.”²¹

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.”²² 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

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”²³—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.²⁴

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.²⁵ Spiritualist fraud, Owen reminds us, was, however, an aspect of both public *and* private mediumship, and thus not necessarily associated with any particular class.²⁶

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

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.²⁷

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.²⁸

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

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.²⁹ 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.”³⁰

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.”³¹ 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.³² 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.”³³ She suggests that the explanatory power of investigating spiritual commodities from an ethnographic and sociological perspective—while critically appraising the

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.³⁴

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 Ukraine³⁵—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

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) Ṭanṭāwī Jawharī—the “father of Egyptian Spiritualism”—and the modern-educated *efendi* ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Islambūlī 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.³⁶

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.³⁷ 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”

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.³⁸

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.

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

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Italian Communism and Anti-Masonic Action: The Polemics of Amadeo Bordiga, 1912–1922

Milan Reith

milan.reith@ru.nl

Abstract

In the early twentieth century, the political status of freemasonry was increasingly called into question. In Italy, a key aspect of these discussions revolved around the perceived contradiction between masonic affiliations and working-class political commitments. A key figure within this context was the Italian writer Amadeo Bordiga, a Marxist who became one of the founders of the Italian Communist Party. In a series of polemical articles written between 1912 and 1922, Bordiga argued that freemasonry was based on bourgeois and conservative foundations, while calling for the expulsion of freemasons from socialist organisations.

This article examines these polemics, as well as the events surrounding their publication. We will see how Bordiga's engagement with anti-masonry intersected with significant moments in his political career—spanning from his youthful intransigence within the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) to his eventual role as the internationally recognised leader of the Leninist movement in Italy. Bordiga's relationship with Benito Mussolini will be discussed, as well as the way in which the two men carried over their early anti-masonic efforts into the development of new political directions in the 1920s. Finally, some attention will be given to how these findings fit into the current historiography on the topic.

Keywords: Amadeo Bordiga; communism; socialism; freemasonry; anti-masonry

Introduction

Freemasonry originated in the associational milieu of urban London in the early eighteenth century.¹ It was based on a mixture of heterogeneous philosophical, esoteric, and religious elements, blended into a system of ritual and live performance, in which members would undergo initiations with the goal of obtaining intellectual insights. This eclectic blend of ideas and practices proved compelling, facilitating freemasonry's global diffusion and establishing it as one of the largest non-governmental secular organisations.

An important source for early masonic philosophy was the Enlightenment—consequently, themes such as progress, perfectibility, and cosmopolitanism played a key role.² As a result, freemasonry in the early eighteenth century was marked by relative tolerance and inclusivity, promoting values that enabled the establishment of lodges across a wide range of cultural, social, and religious contexts. Integral to this philosophy was the idea that the fraternity should bridge different social strata. Thus, in masonic literature we find “the rhetoric of equality, universal brotherhood, and liberty from all class distinctions.”³

However, while freemasonry maintained this “fraternal egalitarianism on the level of ideas,” it also cultivated an “aura of elite sociability, which nurtured the perception of there being a close affiliation between the fraternity and other influential groups in society that were in positions of political or economic power.”⁴ These perceptions of social elitism are closely connected to freemasonry's practices of secrecy, through which the fraternity creates a social-epistemic gap between insiders and outsiders.⁵ Perceptions of freemasonry as an elite phenomenon would persist, and lead to widespread distrust of the fraternity in the public press.

On a related note, we can observe freemasonry's political ambiguity. Since its

1. Jacob, *The Origins of Freemasonry*, 11–25.

2. For an overview of Enlightenment influence, see Önnersfors, *Freemasonry*, 46–62.

3. Urban, “Elitism and Esotericism,” 9.

4. Önnersfors, *Freemasonry*, 107.

5. On the social-epistemic implications of secrecy, see Urban, “The Torment of Secrecy”; Urban, *Secrecy*.

emergence in the eighteenth century, it has encompassed a tension between an inward-looking, ostensibly apolitical orientation—where individual refinement would take place *intra muros* (within the walls)—and a more outwardly engaged, radical strain, in which freemasonry was seen as necessitating socio-political action.⁶ Whereas Anglo-Saxon Freemasonry tended to favour the former, continental freemasonry frequently adopted a more radical orientation, challenging church and crown. In Southern Europe especially, anti-clerical perspectives were popular among freemasons, which placed them in conflict with their predominantly Catholic environment.⁷

In societies marked by significant inequality and political corruption, perceptions of freemasonry as an obscure and influential network often reinforced anxieties that critical political decisions were being made within informal economies, beyond the reach of public accountability or electoral oversight.⁸ This provoked a variety of responses from religious and political movements, who felt they had to reckon with freemasonry's power and influence. By the early twentieth century, elements of anti-masonic rhetoric had been absorbed into various political movements.

This article is about one particular wave of anti-masonic campaigning within socialist and communist organisations in early twentieth-century Italy.⁹ This period saw two major purges of freemasons from socialist organisations—first in the Italian Socialist Party (Partito Socialista Italiano, PSI) in 1914, and secondly, in all organisations affiliated with the Third International in 1922, including the newly established Communist Party of Italy (Partito Comunista d'Italia, PCI). These anti-masonic campaigns and measures will be examined through the role of one of their principal advocates and legitimisers: the Italian writer and political theorist Amadeo Bordiga.

6. Önnersfors, *Freemasonry*, 23–24.

7. Lyttelton, “An Old Church,” 230; Önnersfors, *Freemasonry*, 18.

8. On the perceptions, prejudices and persecutions of freemasonry, see Önnersfors, *Freemasonry*, 105–24.

9. The broader relationship between freemasonry and socialism, labour, and trade unions is ambiguous and complex. Scholarship on the topic is relatively scarce, for some studies, see Halstead and Prescott, “Masonry, Fraternity and Labour”; Arvidsson, *The Style and Mythology*.

The Early Life of Amadeo Bordiga

Amadeo Bordiga was born in Naples on the 13th of June 1889.¹⁰ Oreste Bordiga, his father, was well-known in the area as a professor of agricultural science. His mother, Zaira degli Amadei, was an aristocrat who claimed descent from Italian nobility, naming her son Amadeo in honour of this heritage.¹¹ As a consequence of this, the backdrop of Bordiga's youth was characterised by an affluent and intellectual domestic environment, where the young Bordiga often found himself surrounded by well-educated and progressive individuals. This early exposure to the privileged sphere of intellectual study would notably impact the course of his life, instilling within him a great appreciation for both the natural sciences and historical progress.

Over the course of his secondary education, Bordiga studied philosophy and was there first exposed to the theories of Marxism.¹² This particular system of socio-economic analysis resonated deeply with him, both as a theoretical method and as an ideological outlook. For Bordiga, Marxism held the potential to illuminate the underlying dynamics of the world, with its implicit power structures and complicated history, in a manner both scientific and profoundly meaningful.¹³ Henceforth, he fully immersed himself in an extensive study of the Marxist classics.¹⁴

His passion for this endeavour was matched by a natural talent for mathematics and science, which led him to commence a course of study in engineering at the University of Naples. Bordiga understood his keen interest in engineering and mathematics to be fully compatible with his strong attraction to Marxism, as he firmly believed that the very same materialist underpinnings

10. Chiaradia, "The Spectral Figure," 9. For a biography of Bordiga, see De Clementi, *Amadeo Bordiga*, for a bibliography, see Peregalli and Saggiorno, *Bibliografia*.

11. Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 138–39.

12. Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 138–39.

13. Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 138–39. This duality was the inspiration for the title of the recent translation of his work into English: Bordiga, *The Science and Passion of Communism*.

14. Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 139.

of physicalist science reinforced Marxist social analysis.¹⁵ In 1910, he officially became a member of the PSI.¹⁶

As a political organisation, the PSI embodied the dual nature of Marxism in the early twentieth century, which served as both a foundation for reformist policies and revolutionary fervour. Bordiga became a standard-bearer for the revolution, firmly allying himself with the so-called “intransigents” within the PSI.¹⁷ This faction, a steadfast minority, clung to the idea that an intransigent (inflexible) Marxist system should be the guiding principle of the party, setting themselves against the dominant reformist elements.¹⁸ They rejected alliances with similar leftist parties, striving instead for ideological purity and demanding the removal of reformists from their ranks.

Benito Mussolini (1883–1945), at the time a notable figure within the PSI’s radical faction, quickly became a favourite of Bordiga.¹⁹ As the supreme hope for the intransigents, Mussolini fully aligned himself with radical socialism.²⁰ He was a provocative character in this milieu, branding himself “a real heretic” and the messenger of “absolute intransigence.”²¹ Mussolini notably opposed many of his own party’s members, asserting that professions such as law and priesthood were fundamentally at odds with the principles of authentic socialism. With regards to this issue, he prioritised the need for action over contemplation, vigorously calling for the expulsion of these “impure elements” from the organisation.²² Bordiga praised him as the only national leader who fully understood the warlike truths of Marxism, and subsequently a deep

15. In 1912 Bordiga wrote: “We believe in revolution, not as the Catholic Church believes in Christ, but as the mathematician in the results of his research,” as cited in Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 140.

16. For an overview of Bordiga’s involvement with the PSI, see De Clementi, *Amadeo Bordiga*, 9–58.

17. Craver, “The Third Generation,” 210.

18. Hoare and Smith, introduction, xxix.

19. When considering Mussolini in this period it is important to caution against anachronism, of “manufacturing a coherent Fascist chief (if there ever was such a person) well before the event.” See Bosworth, *Mussolini*, 76.

20. Robsworth, *Mussolini*, 76–99; Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 111–37.

21. Bosworth, *Mussolini*, 77–78.

22. Bosworth, *Mussolini*, 88.

friendship formed between them.²³ This burgeoning association was poised to steer a forthcoming shift within the party.

The Beginnings of Bordiga’s Anti-Masonry

In 1910, Bordiga’s affiliation with the PSI coincided with a notable period in the party’s history. As the historian Christian Palmieri has pointed out, this juncture was notably marked by an emerging opposition to freemasonry.²⁴ At the Milan congress organised by the PSI in October of that year, Mussolini and Gaetano Salvemini (1873–1957) attempted to confront this perceived issue through the introduction of an anti-masonic motion. This initiative sought to compel congress attendees to publicly renounce any ties with the fraternity, with freemasonry being defined, as per Salvemini’s account, as “an occult disease against which there is no remedy.”²⁵ Though the proposal was ultimately not adopted, this incident sheds light on the concerns within the PSI at the precise juncture that Bordiga became of member of this organisation.

Bordiga began his foray into political commentary in late 1911, a move that marked the beginning of his revolutionary career.²⁶ March 1912 witnessed an important development with the release of one of Bordiga’s earliest articles—his first to explicitly address the topic of freemasonry.²⁷ This article, titled “C. Malato e la Massoneria” (“C. Malato and Freemasonry”), featured in the socialist periodical *L’Avanguardia* and took the form of an interview with the Italian-French anarchist Charles Malato (1857–1938).²⁸

23. Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 140.

24. Palmieri, *Mussolini e la massoneria*, 24.

25. Salvemini, as quoted in Palmieri, *Mussolini e la massoneria*, 24.

26. Peregalli and Saggiaro, *Bibliografia*, 23. This article is concerned with signed articles by Bordiga; unsigned, anonymous anti-masonic articles attributed to him are not included in this study. For speculation about which anonymous articles might have been written by Bordiga in the period under consideration, see the table of contents in Gerosa, ed., *Scritti 1911–1926*, vol. 1.

27. Peregalli and Saggiaro, *Bibliografia*, 23; Bordiga, “C. Malato.”

28. Bordiga had the erroneous impression that Malato was of Spanish origin. This is corrected in a footnote added by Luigi Gerosa, the editor of his published works. See Gerosa, ed., *Scritti 1911–1926*, 1:32, footnote 1.

In this article, a youthful Bordiga assumes the role of the interviewer, entering into dialogue with Malato, an experienced “old militant of revolutionary ideas” now in his mid-fifties.²⁹ Throughout their exchange, Malato shares anecdotes of his personal encounters with freemasonry, as well as offering his analysis of freemasonry’s role in modern social life. Notably, he discloses his former membership of the fraternity to Bordiga, a bond he severed following its response to the so-called “Ferrer trial.”

Francisco Ferrer y Guardia (1859–1909) was an anarchist educator and friend of Malato, who was condemned in a mock trial for inciting a popular uprising and executed on 13 October 1909. Ferrer, though not widely known beyond radical groups, became the centre of an international outcry following his death, prompting responses from many prominent intellectuals of the time. In the realm of European libertarian socialism, the Ferrer case became a *cause célèbre*, with Ferrer venerated as a martyr for the cause.³⁰

According to Malato’s testimony, the freemasons had responded to this incident quite differently from the libertarian socialists. He asserted that the fraternity sought to suppress the unrest sparked by the Ferrer trial.³¹ This decision prompted Malato to withdraw from freemasonry, as he believed that its attempts to pacify this situation made it complicit in both maintaining the status quo and stifling genuine expressions of proletarian outrage.³² In the end, Malato viewed the conservatism of freemasonry in this matter as antithetical to his own revolutionary spirit.

Throughout the interview, Malato articulated an ambiguous view of freemasonry. While he praised the virtuous socialists among its members and its legacy in prior revolutionary history, his current “best hypothesis” suggested that the freemasonry of his own time had become an enclave predominantly composed of bourgeois elements. Malato stated that, in his opinion, these bourgeois elements actively functioned as a deterrent or “buffer” to revolutionary

29. Bordiga, “C. Malato.”

30. Park, “The European Reaction”; Laqua, “Freethinkers, Anarchists.”

31. Bordiga, “C. Malato.”

32. Bordiga, “C. Malato.”

proclivities.³³ Despite the interview’s overall critical and conspiratorial stance towards freemasonry, Malato’s reflections on his former associates were notably mixed, suggesting that his departure from freemasonry stemmed from growing scepticism and increasing critique rather than any fervent opposition.

Nevertheless, the campaign against freemasonry within the PSI proceeded undeterred. At the PSI’s regional congress in Emilia Romagna on 16 June 1912, a referendum advocating for the expulsion of freemasons from the party was prepared.³⁴ Approximately a month later, at the congress held in Reggio Emilia, the decision to expel freemasons was put to vote. While a considerable majority supported the expulsion, the low turnout—less than half of those present—caused the vote to lack the necessary weight to effectuate it.³⁵ As a result, the matter was postponed to be revisited at the forthcoming national congress in Ancona.³⁶

As anti-masonic discourse gained prominence within the party, it became clear that the congress in Ancona would play a crucial role in determining the PSI’s official position on this contentious issue. Amid the fervent discourse which followed, in July 1912, Bordiga seized the opportunity to articulate his stance on the issue publicly. At the height of this debate, he presented his second anti-masonic article, titled “Combattiamo i massoni!” (“Let’s fight the freemasons!”), which, like its predecessor, found publication in *L’Avanguardia*.³⁷

Anticipating the Congress of Ancona, 1912–1914

In “Combattiamo i massoni!,” Bordiga articulates his personal opinion of freemasonry for the first time in writing, opening the article with a bold and passionate stance, drawing attention to his fears surrounding what he refers

33. Bordiga, “C. Malato.”

34. Palmieri, *Mussolini e la massoneria*, 25. For the primary text proposing the referendum, see the appendix at De Felice, *Mussolini il rivoluzionario*, 672–74.

35. Out of 29,971 members, 13,120 voted, out of which 9,514 voted for incompatibility, see Palmieri, *Mussolini e la massoneria*, 25.

36. Palmieri, *Mussolini e la massoneria*, 25.

37. Bordiga, “Combattiamo.”

to as the “masonic danger” and its perceived escalation. Adopting a polemical tone, he calls for an unambiguous and direct challenge to this imagined threat, proclaiming, “we must directly attack the enemy that threatens us.”³⁸ In contrast to Malato’s restrained and more ambiguous perspective, Bordiga’s own discourse is distinguished by its emphatic severity, highlighting a divergence in their approaches to this perceived issue.

Bordiga characterises the Freemasons as proponents of a vacuous ideology, riddled with incoherent bourgeois ideas.³⁹ He portrays freemasonry as a blend of pseudohistorical and quasi-religious beliefs, aligned with the patriotism and democratism endemic to the ruling ideology. In contradistinction to these “confused beliefs,” he positions Marxism as a distinguished and principled philosophical system, tangibly anchored in historical and scientific analysis. Socialism is, therefore, portrayed as a force intent on transforming society’s foundational structures rather than preserving them, juxtaposed to the conservative tendencies of freemasonry.⁴⁰

The broader context of Bordiga’s critique becomes more apparent as he reflects on the prevailing perception of freemasonry within the PSI. In one section, he illuminates the backdrop against which his polemic took shape, remarking that “it has become an unfortunate habit to shrug one’s shoulders when one hears this word [freemasonry] and to brand as exaggeration those comrades who draw attention to the masonic question.”⁴¹ This observation reveals the tendency to dismiss concerns regarding freemasonry among his peers and hints at the fact that a significant portion of the party may not have regarded freemasonry as a serious menace. This is supported by the evidence of previously aforementioned voting trends, wherein motions to curb masonic influence were not always able to achieve adequate backing.

38. Bordiga, “Combattiamo.”

39. Bordiga, “Combattiamo.”

40. Bordiga, “Combattiamo.”

41. Bordiga, “Combattiamo.”

When viewed in this context, Bordiga's heated arguments against freemasonry can be interpreted as an attempt to convince or persuade the unmoved majority about the seriousness of his cause. In anticipation of the upcoming Congress of Ancona, with its crucial referendum on freemasonry, we witness an urgency in Bordiga's anti-masonic discourse. Significantly, most of this takes the form of polemics intended to irrefutably demonstrate the incompatibility between socialism and freemasonry, with Bordiga again portraying the latter as an empty and conspicuous bourgeois ideology conclusively at odds with the core tenets of socialism.

Bordiga would continue these efforts with the publication of his third and last anti-masonic polemic prior to the Congress of Ancona, "Ferrer e la Massoneria" ("Ferrer and freemasonry"), which was printed in *Avanti!* on 22 October 1912.⁴² This article was intended to build upon the argument for the incompatibility of freemasonry and socialism that he had previously developed that same year, forming a bridge between his interview with Malato and his own polemic.

In this piece, Bordiga repeatedly asserts his belief in the complicity of freemasonry in the death of Ferrer, whom Bordiga characterises as having been abandoned by the fraternity due to his sincere but dangerous revolutionary tendencies.⁴³ He utilises this incident in an attempt to illustrate his argument that "freemasons – in good or bad faith – come in reality from a body of conservation and defence of the bourgeois class," an ideology fundamentally opposed to the core principles of socialism.⁴⁴ Bordiga continues by arguing that, while freemasonry creates the illusion of philosophical radicalism, the fact that its radical activities are carried out in secrecy evinces its inherent conservatism and incompatibility with revolutionary action. He concludes the article by writing that the final decision regarding this issue was in the hands of the referendum which would soon take place at Ancona.⁴⁵

42. Bordiga, "Ferrer."

43. Bordiga, "Ferrer."

44. Bordiga, "Ferrer."

45. Bordiga, "Ferrer."

The Congress of Ancona, 1914

From 26–29 April 1914, the Congress of Ancona convened, earmarking the relationship between socialism and freemasonry as the eighth point on its agenda.⁴⁶ This topic, delayed from the previous referendum in Reggio Emilia, promised contributions from delegates representing the PSI's numerous regional divisions throughout Italy.

Representing the delegation from Naples at the congress, Bordiga, by then a rising star within the PSI, took to the podium at a national congress for the first time. He commenced his address by lauding his colleague Mussolini as the party's most dependable authority.⁴⁷ Throughout the congress, Bordiga vocalized his recurrent apprehensions regarding freemasonry, linking specific political confusions in Naples to reformist “blockades” and the surreptitious presence of freemasons within the party ranks.⁴⁸

The congress dedicated its second day, 27 April 1914, to addressing the contentious question of freemasonry's compatibility with socialism. The session began with speeches from various representatives, laying out the spectrum of opinions on this issue. Giovanni Zibordi (1870–1943) and Mussolini presented arguments supporting the notion that freemasonry and socialism were incompatible and advocating for the expulsion of freemasons from the party. Conversely, the prominent socialist and freemason Alfredo Poggi (1881–1974) would argue in defence of their compatibility.⁴⁹

With much fervour, Mussolini delivered a speech which forcefully linked freemasonry to the spheres of banking and law, prompting extended applause from his captivated audience. Mussolini's address culminated in an appeal for transparency and openness which he figuratively associated with light, positioning these qualities in direct opposition to the secrecy and darkness he equated with freemasonry:

46. De Felice, *Mussolini il rivoluzionario*, 177.

47. Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 143.

48. Palmieri, *Mussolini e la massoneria*, 39.

49. De Felice, *Mussolini il rivoluzionario*, 191.

“More light, more light!” said Goethe as he died. And we too say: “More light, more light!” Enough of the darkness of the lodges; let us face each other!⁵⁰

Among the 34,152 voters, a commanding majority of 27,378 endorsed the Zibordi-Mussolini proposal to expel Freemasons, while a mere 1,819 supported Poggi’s thesis on compatibility.⁵¹ This decisive outcome led to freemasonry being officially declared incompatible with socialism, sanctioning the removal of those within the party who would not adhere to this ruling. After years of anti-masonic campaigning, the aspirations of Mussolini and Bordiga were finally achieved.

A Parting of the Ways

The collaboration between Bordiga and Mussolini was not to last, with the outbreak of World War I just a few months later playing a crucial role in their estrangement. Always a staunch opponent of war participation, Bordiga found himself at odds with Mussolini when the latter shifted towards interventionism in the war and began to espouse nationalist views. This divergence of positions caused Bordiga to become a vocal critic of his former ally.⁵²

Eventually, Mussolini resigned from his position as the editor of *Avanti!*, a move that left Bordiga feeling disheartened, as reflected in his writings: “In this moment of unhappy separation for all, we can only send our deeply felt salutation to Benito Mussolini, expressing the sentiments of all socialists.”⁵³ Three weeks after stepping down, Mussolini’s establishment of his own newspaper, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, cemented the final break between him and Bordiga.⁵⁴ Bordiga, now regarding Mussolini as a traitor and adversary, advocated for his expulsion from the PSI and proposed a boycott of his newly founded periodical.⁵⁵

50. Mussolini, “La discussione.” A full reproduction of the text can be found in Palmieri, *Mussolini e la massoneria*, 40–42.

51. De Felice, *Mussolini il rivoluzionario*, 191; Palmieri, *Mussolini e la massoneria*, 43.

52. Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 147.

53. Bordiga, as cited in Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 147.

54. This newspaper would later, from October 1922 onwards, become the official press organ of Fascist Italy. See Robsworth, *Mussolini*, 106.

55. Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 147.

In his formative years, Bordiga regarded Mussolini as the beacon of hope for the workers' movement, yet these events signified a permanent break between the two former allies as their paths diverged irrevocably. Mussolini began to promote a brand of socialism that was “national” and “anti-Marxist,” before ultimately discarding the label altogether in favour of fascism.⁵⁶ At the same time, Bordiga moved in a starkly different direction, exchanging Mussolini for a new ideological champion. He found renewed hope for the future of Italian communism in the figure of Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924). Lenin's revolutionary leadership and unwavering commitment to orthodox Marxism positioned him as Bordiga's newfound inspiration, a figure capable of guiding Italy towards a classless and stateless society.

The Origins of Leninism

Leninism would become the defining aspect of Bordiga's political outlook from this point onward. We must now turn our attention to Russia, the birthplace of Leninism, as it was here that “Marxism was transformed into a dogmatic system of dialectical and historical materialism, combined with innovative theories of party and revolution.”⁵⁷

It is important to acknowledge the historical setting in which Russian Marxists were writing. The Tsarist regime of the nineteenth century had attempted to eradicate and outlaw almost all political action and thought, yet it was also unable to enforce its ban on ideas.⁵⁸ Within Russian Marxism, this situation sparked a debate on the optimal type of party organisation for success in the face of political repression. Marx himself was of little guidance here, as he had lived in nineteenth-century Germany, a society in which the working

56. Robsworth, *Mussolini*, 120.

57. Van der Zweerde, *Russian Political Philosophy*, 37.

58. Meyer, *Leninism*, 20.

class possessed the right to vote, as well as freedom of speech and association.⁵⁹ This problem of how to achieve a classless and stateless society across vastly different political contexts forced an innovation which would be crucial in settling the political nature of Marxism in Russia.⁶⁰

As the twentieth century dawned, this debate attained a heightened sense of urgency. The Russian Social Democratic Labour Party found itself divided into two opposing wings—subsequently known as the Menshevik and Bolshevik factions. The Mensheviks favoured a party with a broad membership, dedicated to organising the working class for legal political action in line with the social-democratic models of Western Europe.⁶¹

In opposition, Lenin introduced his most significant innovation to Marxist strategy with the proposal of a novel type of party organisation.⁶² Advocating for an essentially illegal and covert party characterised by a robust, military-like organisation, Lenin introduced the concept of the vanguard party. This group was to consist of the most advanced sector of the working class: intellectuals trained in scientific socialism who would serve as professional revolutionaries. To fully grasp the critical role of these professional revolutionaries and their connection to the broader working class, a deeper exploration of Lenin's perspective on the masses is essential. This inquiry sheds light on the underlying rationale for such a party structure and its intended function within the revolutionary movement.

Lenin contended that, if left to their own devices, the working class would remain inert and unable to achieve its historical destiny. While recognising the workers' awareness of their suffering under capitalism, Lenin often characterised

59. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory*, 810. Besides that, important to note is that a lot of Marx's texts, such as *The German Ideology*, and the *Paris Manuscripts* were unavailable to Lenin. He rather relied on *The Communist Manifesto*, *Capital*, and texts by Friedrich Engels, which were much more readily accessible in Russia at the time.

60. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory*, 810–11.

61. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory*, 812.

62. Van der Zweerde, *Russian Political Philosophy*, 51.

this awareness as a “nonrational revolt,” marked by mere feelings or “spontaneity.”⁶³ These feelings, he believed, possessed destructive, formidable, and fertile qualities, but if not properly directed, they would result in senseless violence.

Lenin juxtaposed the notion of spontaneity with a pivotal element of his philosophical framework: “consciousness.”⁶⁴ He posited that the elite cadre of revolutionaries within the vanguard party was essential for harnessing the raw spontaneity of the masses, guiding it in accordance with historical determinism. This principle underpins the Leninist conceptualisation of the party as the tangible manifestation, or institutionalisation, of consciousness.⁶⁵ Within this framework, the party assumes a role of intellectual and scientific authority, exerting control over the unstructured spontaneity of the working class and thereby channelling it towards revolutionary objectives.

The Emergence of the PCI

The year 1917 was a watershed moment in political history as the world was shaken by the force of the Bolshevik Revolution. As the first architects of a majorly successful socialist uprising, the Bolshevik Revolution was recognised within communist circles as an influential model which could potentially be replicated by revolutionaries all over the world.⁶⁶

As reports of the purported success of the Bolshevik Revolution began to circulate throughout Italy, a renewed revolutionary fervour ignited within the PSI. The prospect of emulating this triumph in an Italian context ceased to be a mere ideal. Rather, it transformed into something concrete, tangible, and seemingly within grasp:

The idea of “doing the same as in Russia” spread like wildfire. By May the prefect of the city was asking the Government to proclaim the province of Turin a “war zone”.

63. Meyer, *Leninism*, 29.

64. Meyer, *Leninism*, 28–29.

65. Meyer, *Leninism*, 32–33.

66. Conversely, Mussolini described Leninism as entailing “autocracy, bestiality, terror and chaos.” See Robsworth, *Mussolini*, 120.

Socialist speakers urged workers to “come to meetings in the future . . . with revolvers . . .” to use against the police, and stressed that “it is imperative not to waste time, but to work actively for a general insurrection, get hold of bombs . . .”, etc.⁶⁷

Apart from energising the Italian socialists, the Bolshevik Revolution would also significantly shift the emphasis from the developed European nations to lesser-developed countries as the centre of revolutionary action. This paradigm shift, which reallocated attention from affluent countries to the global periphery, deeply influenced Bordiga, a native of southern Italy—a region whose poverty stood in great contrast to the wealthier north.⁶⁸ All of this provided both the inspiration and the initiative to transpose the strategies of the Bolsheviks into the context of an Italian political framework.⁶⁹

In 1919, the PSI expressed its desire to affiliate with the Third International (the Comintern), a global communist organisation directed by the Soviet Union.⁷⁰ Shortly thereafter, the Third International demanded that, if the PSI desired to be affiliated with the organisation, it must expel all reformist and moderate elements from the party. Bordiga, with his appetite for revolutionary change, championed this expulsion and proposed that the PSI should abstain from electoral politics, instead transforming itself into a select and militant revolutionary force.⁷¹ Despite the PSI’s eagerness to join the International, a considerable segment of the party resisted Bordiga’s radical proposals. Their lack of cohesion and cautious stance ultimately left them unable to meet the prerequisites for membership.⁷²

The left wing of the party, the stringent communists, were unsatisfied with this result. Between 1919 and 1920, they began to make plans to split from

67. Hoare and Smith, Introduction, xxxii.

68. Chiaradia, “The Spectral Figure,” 51–58; Grenville, *A History*, 31–36.

69. Bordiga for instance called the Bolshevik Revolution a “glorious and shining example” for the Italian situation. See his 1919 article “Il bolscevismo.” See also De Grand, *The Italian Left*, 35; Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 138.

70. De Grand, *The Italian Left*, 36.

71. De Grand, *The Italian Left*, 38.

72. De Grand, *The Italian Left*, 40–41.

the greater party.⁷³ Yet the communists were also internally divided, owing to significant disagreements regarding how to structure the new organisation. There were two key groups defending two very different political strategies. One was headed by Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), who saw the factory occupations in Turin as the foremost edge of revolutionary action, being more so influenced by syndicalism and council communism.⁷⁴ The other faction was headed by Bordiga, who, once again, found himself heavily influenced by the Leninist model and emphasised the formation of a strong and unified party.

Despite their initial differences, these factions found common ground at the 1921 Livorno Congress, leading to a decisive split from the PSI and the subsequent formation of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) under Bordiga's leadership.⁷⁵ This newly established party quickly garnered support, attracting approximately 42,000 members. Within less than a month of its inception, the Third International endorsed the PCI as the sole legitimate communist party in Italy, solidifying its status in the international communist movement.⁷⁶ The founding of the PCI under Bordiga's leadership marked a significant milestone in his political career. Under his guidance, the party would adopt a firmly "orthodox" communist position, backed by the Soviet Union and now unencumbered by the influence of the reformists whom Bordiga had so deeply opposed. This significant moment in the party's history was celebrated with enthusiastic commendations from the wider international communist movement. When in December 1921, Bordiga applied for a passport, a government official described him as "the soul of the communist movement in Italy."⁷⁷

73. De Grand, *The Italian Left*, 45.

74. El-Ojeili, "Communism," 347.

75. De Grand, *The Italian Left*, 45.

76. De Grand, *The Italian Left*, 46.

77. Chiaradia, "The Spectral Figure," 185.

Anti-Masonry in the Third International, 1922

From 5 November to 5 December 1922, the Fourth World Congress of the Third International convened, with eight distinct resolutions tabled for debate. One noteworthy resolution, the “Political Resolution on the French Question,” included a section which addressed “freemasonry, the League for the Rights of Man, and the bourgeois press.”⁷⁸ Here, a proposal was put forth, seeking to prohibit party members from holding affiliations with freemasonry. In the 28th session, held on 1 December 1922, Lev Davidovich Bronstein (1879–1940), better known as Leon Trotsky, presented his personal viewpoint on the matter:

What must be stressed is the complete, absolute, and irreconcilable incompatibility of the revolutionary spirit with that of petty-bourgeois freemasonry, which is a tool of the big bourgeoisie.⁷⁹

Moreover, Trotsky would argue during the congress that, “we made an error of criminal laxity by allowing valuable comrades to belong to the masons. But as soon as we recognised this error, we launched an irreconcilable struggle against this apparatus for preventing revolution.”⁸⁰

The resolution was adopted, compelling any “communist freemason” to publicly renounce his ties to freemasonry by 1 January 1923.⁸¹ Should it be revealed past this deadline that a member of the Communist party had maintained affiliation with freemasonry, they would face expulsion. Additionally, the resolution stipulated that individuals severing their masonic ties were ineligible to occupy significant roles within the party for a two-year period, ensuring a clear demarcation between party allegiance and masonic association. Once this

78. For an English translation of the proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Third International, see Ridell, ed., *Towards the United Front*. For the specific resolution on the “French Question,” see 1123–32; on “Freemasonry, the League of the Rights of Man, and the bourgeois press,” see 1128–30.

79. Trotsky as cited in Ridell, *Towards the United Front*, 995.

80. Ridell, *Towards the United Front*, 997.

81. Andrés, “Aproximaciones,” 44.

decision was formalised, the press organs affiliated with the Third International initiated the publication of a series of anti-masonic articles. This move was strategically aimed at countering any dissent regarding the decisive policy of masonic expulsion which had been ratified at the congress.

On 24 December, an earlier anti-masonic article by Trotsky, “Communisme et franc-maçonnerie” (“Communism and freemasonry”), was reprinted in *L’Humanité*, the official newspaper of the French Communist Party (Parti communiste français, PCF).⁸² In a closely timed sequence, the very next day saw the republication of the first segment of Bordiga’s extensive anti-masonic article, “Le mouvement ouvrier italien et la franc-maçonnerie,” in the same newspaper—this time addressing the issue from an Italian perspective.⁸³ In 1922, Bordiga was at the zenith of his influence and authority; therefore the juxtaposition of his article with Trotsky’s from the previous day saw them form an imposing two-pronged persuasive force. This argumentative strategy was designed to quell scepticism surrounding the anti-masonic resolutions and measures enacted at the Fourth Congress.

Bordiga’s 1922 article, which addresses a French readership, escalated his critique beyond his previous anti-masonic polemics.⁸⁴ Now, adopting a more conspiratorial tone than before, Bordiga argued that freemasonry served within the early years of the PSI as the “occult centre,” orchestrating the diversion of the proletariat from its class struggle.⁸⁵ Recounting his interpretation of the PSI’s recent history, he asserted that freemasons had, at one point, exercised

82. Trotsky, “Communisme et franc-maçonnerie.” The original article was published on 25 November 1922. See the bibliography for the different versions.

83. The text has a complicated publication history. It was first published in *La Correspondance Internationale* on 16 December 1922. The first part of the text was then reproduced in *L’Humanité* on 25 December 1922. The first text in its original form is lost, while the second is available in the archive of *L’Humanité*. A digital retranslated version of the lost original version was published on the website marxists.org. See the bibliography for the different versions, Bordiga, “Le mouvement.”

84. Bordiga, “Le mouvement.”

85. Bordiga, “Le mouvement.”

complete control over the party, ushering in an era in which reformism had weakened the revolutionary fervency of the workers' movement.

This polemic also discusses the broader implications of freemasonry's influence on socialism, suggesting that it led to a dilution of socialist principles into a form of bourgeois democratism. Bordiga adopts a dramatic tone, striving to persuade his readership vis-à-vis the absolute opposition of freemasonry and socialism:

Socialism had forgotten that it was forged out of a powerful critique which was directly opposed to bourgeois democracy and to the mountain of hypocrisy and lies on which it was built thanks to the ingenuity of those who were its proponents and to the dishonesty of those who were its leaders. We have been able to re-establish for our own part and for the proletariat, these rich truths regarding doctrine and propaganda which is informed by an iconoclastic drive which sheds light on the dark recesses of the temple of the Great Architect.⁸⁶

An interesting aspect of this citation lies in its employment of the light-darkness metaphor, in which communism's iconoclastic zeal is likened to a beacon of light, contrasted with freemasonry's depiction as an obscure, dark force. This specific metaphor echoes Mussolini's rhetoric at the 1914 Ancona Congress, a speech witnessed first-hand by Bordiga.⁸⁷ This parallel raises the possibility that Bordiga may have borrowed a metaphor with distinctly "Mussolinian" connotations.

Continuing his narrative, Bordiga proudly recounts his initial anti-masonic endeavours between 1912 and 1914. He underscores key moments, such the Socialist Congress of Reggio Emilia in 1912 and the subsequent gathering in Ancona in 1914, where freemasonry was unequivocally declared to be incompatible with the principles of socialism. Bordiga writes that, during the purge following the Congress of Ancona, the "parasites" left the party, while the true workers remained.⁸⁸ In light of this, he urged his French counterparts to acknowledge the importance of the Third International's anti-masonic

86. Bordiga, "Le mouvement."

87. Cf. with the passage cited earlier from Mussolini, "La discussione."

88. Bordiga, "Le mouvement."

decision. Bordiga recommended that, in the same manner the PSI conducted its purge after the Ancona Congress, the PCF must now expediently implement the purge mandated by the Fourth Congress.

In arguing that the PSI's purge should serve as an inspiration for the PCF, Bordiga recounts his anti-masonic activities between 1912 and 1914. However, in this narrative, he conspicuously excludes any mention of his erstwhile comrade Mussolini, despite Mussolini's key importance as a driving force behind these efforts. This omission can hardly be said to be surprising, as any favourable mention of the then-leader of Fascist Italy would have been extremely contentious in communist circles. Consequently, it would appear that Bordiga strategically employs the PSI's previous anti-masonic actions to endorse the resolution of the Third International, while deftly omitting any mention of Mussolini's role in these historical events.

Yet Bordiga was not alone in revisiting the anti-masonic efforts of 1912-1914. On 16 May 1925, following the enactment of the "Law on Associations," which outlawed freemasonry in Fascist Italy, Mussolini also reminisced about the early anti-masonic efforts within the PSI.⁸⁹ He anachronistically cast himself as a "fascist militant in the Socialist Party," praising the decision to expel freemasons at the Congress of Ancona.⁹⁰ In this way, Mussolini framed the fascist legislation as a natural extension of his earlier anti-masonic efforts which took place in a socialist context. Consequently, the campaign left a favourable impression both on Mussolini, who connected it to fascist ideology, and on Bordiga and the Third International in 1922, who regarded it as categorically in continuity with the orthodoxy of the global communist movement. Ultimately, it seems that the idea of an invisible masonic enemy obstructing the progress of the PSI would prove to be convenient for the retrospective narratives of both ideologies.

89. For the primary text, see Mussolini, *Scritti*, 67-70, reproduced as Appendix in Palmieri, *Mussolini e la massoneria*, 187-89, here 187.

90. Mussolini as cited in Palmieri, *Mussolini e la massoneria*, 187.

Bordiga after 1922

Despite the fact that anti-masonry played an important role in Bordiga's politics from 1912 to 1922, this particular dimension has not been treated much in historical studies. Contemporary scholarship on Bordiga tends to consign his passionate polemics on this subject to the periphery, often confining them to brief footnotes or fleeting acknowledgments.⁹¹ In order to explain how our findings fit into the larger historiography, it is important to explicate how Bordiga's legacy evolved after 1922.

Our story culminated with Bordiga as the leader of the PCI. However, Bordiga's tenure at the helm of this organisation was to be short-lived. By 1930, he faced expulsion from the party amidst accusations of Trotskyism, marking a critical juncture in his intellectual and political journey.⁹² This event holds particular significance for our inquiry due to its impact on subsequent historiography. Indeed, Bordiga's expulsion relegated him to the status of *persona non grata*, setting in motion an effort to erase him from the annals of history, particularly as most histories of the communist party were then being penned by party loyalists. This act of exclusion serves as a stark illustration of communist historical revisionism, whereby Bordiga's contributions (especially between 1921–1922) were obscured to align the historical narrative with the evolving political directives of the party, showcasing the manner in which historiography was manipulated to conform to prevailing ideological currents.⁹³

Within the history of the Italian communist movement, the contrast between the portrayal of Bordiga and Gramsci is striking. Although both held each other in high regard, they nevertheless followed divergent ideological paths regarding the direction of the movement. Beyond 1930, Bordiga's person and ideas were

91. For example: Chiaradia's study spanning 392 pages and Goldner's study spanning 27 pages do not mention Bordiga's anti-masonic views at all, Drake's chapter spanning 27 pages and Basso's introduction spanning 98 pages both spend one sentence mentioning Bordiga's anti-masonry.

92. Chiaradia, "The Spectral Figure," 12–13.

93. Chiaradia, "The Spectral Figure," 11.

increasingly sidelined and subjected to criticism, while Gramsci was elevated as his theories found favour within communist orthodoxy as well as with leftist intellectuals more broadly. This development has led to what historian John E. Chiaradia has termed the “myth of Gramsci,” a historical misrepresentation that positioned Gramsci as the founding father of Italian communism, while effectively marginalising Bordiga by diminishing both his contributions and his presence in historical accounts.⁹⁴ This has resulted in a series of historical readings of the period with a discernible bias, leading to a historiographical trajectory that marginalises Bordiga’s influence on the Italian communist movement.

This trend persisted in scholarship until recent decades, when certain scholars from the 1970s onwards began to re-evaluate the conventional narrative surrounding Bordiga.⁹⁵ This historiographical shift redresses past misrepresentations by acknowledging Bordiga’s historical influence, particularly during the PCI’s nascent stage in 1921–1922.⁹⁶ The year 2020 witnessed a noteworthy advancement in this evolving area of research, when a scholarly translation of selected works by Bordiga, published by a team of translators and an editor, was released under the title *The Science and Passion of Communism*.⁹⁷ In the introduction, Bordiga is portrayed as “one of the most brilliant and forgotten Marxists of the 20th century.”⁹⁸ This continual scholarly reassessment endeavours to overcome the limitations of earlier research and presents a more nuanced portrayal of Bordiga’s role in the history of Italian communism.

94. Chiaradia, “The Spectral Figure,” 7.

95. An important text in that regard was a doctoral dissertation from 1972: Chiaradia, “The Spectral Figure”; another was an article from 1995: Goldner, “Bordiga,” 73–100. The most recent instance dates to 2020: Basso, introduction, 1–98.

96. Another aspect that is highlighted in this historiographical trajectory was Bordiga’s challenge to Stalin; see Basso “Amadeo Bordiga Was the Last Communist,” Goldner, “Bordiga,” 73–100.

97. Bordiga, *The Science and Passion of Communism*.

98. Loren Goldner, as quoted and affirmed by Basso, Introduction, 95. A similar claim is made in the description of the book, in which Bordiga is described as a “brilliant Italian communist.” Goldner makes a similar statement in “Bordiga,” 75, calling him “one of the most original, brilliant and utterly neglected Marxist theorists of the century.”

Yet in this effort to rehabilitate Bordiga's reputation, there has been a tendency to ignore aspects of his personal and political history that contradict a more laudable portrayal. The manifestation of this selective recall becomes particularly apparent in the treatment of Bordiga's early association and formative experiences with Mussolini. For example, *The Science and Passion of Communism's* introduction omits any reference to Bordiga's once-favourable views of Mussolini.⁹⁹ This is not an isolated phenomenon but falls into a bigger pattern in which certain histories of the Italian workers' movement routinely omit the perhaps discomfiting reality that Mussolini was once a prominent and beloved figure in radical socialist circles.¹⁰⁰

Although the new tendency of scholarship to correct Bordiga's image by setting straight some of these older distortions is laudable, there also remains a side to his life and work that might not fit this rehabilitated image. This article hopes to have contributed something to highlighting this other side of Bordiga's story: his early anti-masonic politics in collaboration with Mussolini and, more broadly, his often paranoid pre-occupation with party purity, particularly directed towards fellow members of his party who happened to be freemasons.

Conclusion

Bordiga's stance against freemasonry is emblematic of his larger ideological commitments, shedding light on the occurrence of contentious debates surrounding this topic within the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) and, subsequently, within the Third International. This article has demonstrated how Bordiga's engagement with anti-masonry intersected with significant moments in his political career—spanning from his youthful intransigence within the PSI to his eventual role as the leader of the Italian Communist Party.

99. Basso, Introduction, 1–98.

100. This omission has, for instance, been highlighted by the historian of fascism, Renzo de Felice, who deliberately titled the first part of his circa 6000-page biography of Mussolini, *Mussolini il rivoluzionario* (Mussolini the revolutionary) as a provocation against those who would dismiss Mussolini's involvement with socialism. See Richard Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 112.

Bordiga's opposition to freemasonry was rooted in a belief that its bourgeois foundations were fundamentally at odds with the communist cause. This perspective did not exist in isolation but echoed wider party sentiments and reflected the political atmosphere of the time. Through his prolific writings and political activism between 1912 and 1922, Bordiga sought to underline freemasonry's supposed conservative nature and incompatibility with socialism—anticipating the expulsion of freemasons at the Congress of Ancona in 1914 and legitimising the anti-masonic measures taken at the Fourth Congress of the Third International in 1922. Apart from highlighting this supposed theoretical irreconcilability, Bordiga's polemics also exhibited conspiratorial discourse, such as the idea that political action would be coordinated from the secrecy of the lodges in order to block the revolutionary tendencies of the proletariat.

While Bordiga and Mussolini initially bonded over their shared intransigent socialist beliefs and mutual opposition to freemasonry, their camaraderie unravelled as Mussolini veered towards interventionism in World War I and subsequently laid the ideological foundations of fascism, prompting Bordiga to publicly renounce Mussolini as a traitor to their once-shared ideals. Although Bordiga and Mussolini subsequently came to represent the two opposite ends of the political spectrum, they kept defending the legacy of their earlier anti-masonic efforts in the 1920s: Bordiga defended them within the context of the international communist movement in 1922, and Mussolini drew on the same history in order to legitimise the fascist Law on Associations in 1925.

While contemporary research has commendably begun to challenge the historical marginalisation of Bordiga in earlier research, this rehabilitation has at times produced its own form of selective memory. Aspects of Bordiga's trajectory, such as his early collaboration with Mussolini and his fervent anti-masonic campaigns, are often confined to brief footnotes or fleeting acknowledgments, while Bordiga himself is presented as a brilliant political theorist. This article hopes to have contributed something to the reconstruction of that other part of Bordiga's story.

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(De)Mythologizing the German Middle Classes: Siegfried Kracauer, the Eugen Diederichs Publishing House and the Journal *Die Tat* in the Weimar Era

Ansgar Martins

ansgar.martins@gmail.com

Abstract

This article traces Siegfried Kracauer's encounters with the neo-religious journal *Die Tat* and its publisher Eugen Diederichs in interwar Germany. Both Kracauer and *Die Tat* began the 1920s as participants in the post-war quest for spiritual renewal but ended the decade on opposing paths: Kracauer as a left-wing cultural critic and *Die Tat* as a vehicle of right-wing radicalization. Focusing on their shared preoccupation with the emerging urban middle classes, the study explores how a discourse once framed in religious terms was gradually displaced by social and political concerns. Kracauer interpreted the “transcendental homelessness” of modernity as the intellectual condition of the salaried masses, while *Die Tat* transformed similar anxieties into a völkisch-socialist mythology of the “middle.” Their divergent responses to the same crisis illuminate the ideological polarization of Weimar culture and the shifting boundaries between religion, politics, and social theory in Germany's interwar public sphere.

Keywords: Siegfried Kracauer; Salaried Masses; Eugen Diederichs; Weimar Germany; Middle Classes

Introduction

In this article, I chart the encounters of one German Jewish intellectual, Siegfried Kracauer (1889–1966), with one particular neo-religious journal and movement in the interwar period: *Die Tat: Monatschrift für die Zukunft deutscher Kultur* [The Deed: Monthly Journal for the Future of German Culture], its publisher, Eugen Diederichs (1867–1930), and the *Tat* Circle.¹ The Diederichs publishing house produced a broad range of philosophical, religious, political, and esoteric literature. Both *Die Tat* and Kracauer underwent a transformation between 1918 and 1933. They started out as committed commentators on the German neo-religious scene after the First World War, eagerly searching for higher truths and denouncing false prophets (as I will illustrate in regard to Rudolf Steiner and Martin Buber). The nature of their subsequent parting of the ways illustrates important political trends in 1920s Germany. Kracauer evolved into a leftist intellectual and cultural critic whom the Weimar Republic’s foremost liberal daily, the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, offered a prominent forum for his frequently rapier-like commentary. *Die Tat*, by contrast, having initially accommodated a broad range of mutually contradictory political positions, subsequently underwent a process of right-wing radicalization and extended its readership by firmly positioning itself within the spectrum of völkisch socialism.

In both instances, the religious discourse was increasingly displaced by politics. Kracauer and the contributors to *Die Tat* shared a particular interest in the new middle classes emerging after the First World War, notably in the urban centres.²

1. Text and quotations translated by Lars Fischer (The History Practice, Berlin).

2. What may be less obvious to Anglophone readers is the extent to which in Germany, since the early twentieth century, the concept of the middle class(es) has been understood not merely to denote a particular level of income, wealth, and status relative to other classes, but has also been associated with the conceit that the middle class(es) form the middle, the centre of society—roughly in the sense in which Lipset, *Political Man*, used the term when referring to the “extremism of the centre.” Notably the middle class saw itself as the social group that truly embodied society’s essence and values and formed its actual backbone. While this may seem unremarkable today, at a time when more than 70 percent of economically active Germans were either industrial or agricultural workers, this was a stark claim indeed.

While Kracauer was preoccupied with their economic precarity and ideological disorientation, the *Tat* Circle conceived of them as the locus of ultimate social integration, placing them at the core of its vision of a totalitarian revolution that would be social in character yet unconcerned with issues of class.

Siegfried Kracauer's "Transcendental Homelessness"

Growing up in an acculturated Jewish environment in Frankfurt, Kracauer studied architecture, his life-long yearning for philosophy notwithstanding.³ Yet, in keeping with the zeitgeist, he had no interest in the abstract and idealistic (in this context, neo-Kantian) approach to theory and sought a more phenomenological approach to objects and people. As one of its features editors (until the paper dropped him in 1933), he was able to use the widely read *Frankfurter Zeitung*, to present his gradually evolving social theory. It treated substantial issues on the basis of often very slight changes such as the displacement of items such as inkpots, monocles and suspenders, and elucidated the secret messages encoded in urban panoramas, umbrellas, leisure parks and neon signs. An avid reviewer of new movies and novels, and an acute observer of everyday mass culture, Kracauer also functioned as "a highly sensitive seismograph of the Weimar Republic's intellectual and religious currents."⁴ Alas, historians of religion have rarely taken notice of him in this capacity. His reports from anthroposophical congresses, gatherings of Catholic academics or Hermann Keyserling's School of

3. Koch, *Siegfried Kracauer* offers an excellent introduction to the man and his work. See also Agard, *Siegfried Kracauer*, and Später, *Siegfried Kracauer*. As a survey of relevant edited collections indicates, the principal focus of research on Kracauer has increasingly shifted in recent decades from his framing of the salaried employees and the middle classes towards aesthetic themes. See Kessler and Levin, eds., *Siegfried Kracauer*; Volk, ed., *Siegfried Kracauer*; Grunert and Kimmich, eds., *Denken durch die Dinge*; Gemünden and Moltke, eds., *Culture in the Anteroom*; Ahrens, Fleming, Martin, and Vedder, eds., "*Doch ist das Wirkliche auch vergessen, so ist es darum noch nicht getilgt*"; Biebl, Lethen, and von Moltke, eds., *Siegfried Kracauer's Grenzgänge*; Hunter and Trautmann, eds., *In the Sense of Material Reality*.

4. Bauschulte, *Religionsbahnhöfe in der Weimarer Republik*, 53. The German term *geistig* can mean simply "intellectual," but frequently has the connotation "spiritual" as well, making it virtually untranslatable.

Wisdom, are important sources for scholars interested in relevant trends in the 1920s.⁵ In what follows, I illustrate this by focussing on Kracauer’s encounters with *Die Tat* and its publisher and sometime editor Eugen Diederichs. Over time, their focus on esotericist concerns was increasingly displaced by sociological and class considerations. Theo-political concerns continued to attract a great deal of their attention, but the ratio between the numbers of primarily political texts and specific treatments of religious issues published both by Kracauer and in *Die Tat* shifted markedly towards the former.

The point of departure for the interaction between them was a feeling of “transcendental homelessness” in whose grip Kracauer found himself following the First World War.⁶ He promptly proceeded to project his own lack of a sense of spiritual and intellectual belonging and his personal disillusionment with existing traditions onto modernity per se. The concept of “transcendental homelessness” was adopted from Georg Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel*, a book that enjoyed a broad reception at the time.⁷ In it, Lukács presented a historico-metaphysical theory of literature, charting a course from the meaningful deeds of the Homeric epics to the epistemic and eschatological randomness in which the isolated subject of the modern Dostoyevskyan novel was trapped.

Lukács’s account was predicated on a Romanticist historical fairy tale: one upon a time, in “blissful times,” a bright light illuminated the heavens and the earth. Back then, because “the fire that burns in the soul is of the same character as the stars,” the “starry sky mapped out all the paths one could and ought to tread.”⁸ Yet humankind had since entered the “era of complete sinfulness,” and the paradigmatic literary form of this age was the novel.⁹ This myth of an

5. See Martins, “*Um Himmels willen nicht vom Materiellen ablenken*” (forthcoming).

6. See Mülдер, *Siegfried Kracauer*, 19–48; Martins, “Katholizismus als esoterischer Sehnsuchtsort.”

7. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 41.

8. Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 29 (translation amended).

9. Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 152 (translation amended).

original golden age in Antiquity, when the world was “vast and yet like home,”¹⁰ reverberated across all of Kracauer’s early works.

In his first monograph, *Sociology as Science* (1922), Kracauer proceeded from the same point of departure, the notion of a “meaningful age,” of a world replete with meaning in which “the divine pervades life, and even the stones bear testimony to the divine being.”¹¹ Yet all this meaning had since seeped away, hence the need for human interpretive endeavours such as literary theory, sociology and science. Quoting Novalis, Lukács argued that “[p]hilosophy is really homesickness,” an expression of the yearning and quest for an orderly and universally meaningful world that no longer existed.¹² On Kracauer’s account, the world had disintegrated “into the multifariousness of that which exists and the subject confronted with this multifariousness. Once integrated into the chain of characters populating the world, the subject now emerges from the chaos all alone. . . . Catapulted into the frigid infinity of empty space and empty time,” the subject faces “infinite realms of reality.”¹³

Observers poked fun at Kracauer’s neo-Romanticist crisis theory and cultural pessimism even then. Perhaps the harshest mockery was formulated by Franz Rosenzweig in a letter to Martin Buber. “And then,” he wrote, “we are told for the umpteenth time that ‘we’ live in shattered, fractured, fragmented and chaotic ‘times’, from within which a ‘religious yearning’ desperately pines for the big, beautiful torte of unity that a kindhearted pastry chef, ‘in the Middle Ages’, used to home deliver to a humankind ‘close to God’ as ideological dessert.”¹⁴

10. Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 29 (translation amended).

11. Kracauer, “Soziologie als Wissenschaft,” 12.

12. Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 29.

13. Kracauer, “Soziologie als Wissenschaft,” 12.

14. Rosenzweig, letter to Martin Buber, 11 October 1922, in Rosenzweig, *Briefe und Tagebücher*, vol. 1, 835. On the tense relations between Rosenzweig and Kracauer, see Baumann, “Drei Briefe”; Handelman, “The Forgotten Conversation”; Martins, “*Um Himmels willen*.”

Critique of Ideology Meets the Intellectual and Spiritual Homelessness of the Middle Classes

Towards the end of the 1920s, Kracauer developed an alternative explanation for the lamented sense of disorientation, which he articulated in his book *The Salaried Masses* (1929/30).¹⁵ He now identified transcendental homelessness as a phenomenon specific to the middle classes (his own included). To be sure, his parental home was, by conventional standards, indeed a middle-class or urban lower-middle-class household. Yet, Kracauer wanted to make a more specific point. He conceived of the middle classes not as a timeless fixed category within a stable social constellation, but as a specific social formation emerging under the specific economic and historical conditions prevalent after the First World War. He occasionally referred to them as “intermediate strata” and often as the “mass.” His term of choice, however, was “salaried employees.” He observed that, “[o]ver a period in which the number of workers has not yet doubled, salary-earners have multiplied almost five times.”¹⁶ While this had cost some their assets, others owed their upward social mobility to the war. Yet others were mere fortune seekers fleeing the countryside for the cities. Kracauer’s portrayal of Berlin’s salaried employees offers a unique blend of interviews, ethnographical observation and textual exegesis crafted in a highly innovative manner from reportage, personal accounts and empirical social research.¹⁷

Kracauer was certainly not alone in his preoccupation with salaried employees. Because they cut across established class divisions and engendered the mass societies of the twentieth century, they fascinated sociologists and have done so ever since.¹⁸ As salaried employees, they stood neither on the side

15. Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses*.

16. Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses*, 29.

17. See Koch, *Siegfried Kracauer*, 37–47; Hoffmann, “Kritische Öffentlichkeit als Erkenntnisprozess”; Mülder-Bach, “Cinematic Ethnography”; Band, “Siegfried Kracauer’s Expedition in die Alltagswelt der Berliner Angestellten”; Band, *Mittelschichten und Massenkultur*; Reitz, “Die Klasse ohne Eigenschaften.”

18. Reitz, “Die Klasse ohne Eigenschaften,” also brings Kracauer’s findings up-to-date with reference to international sociological debates.

of the capitalists who owned the means of production nor on the side of the proletariat who owned only their labour.¹⁹ Klaus Fritzsche’s study on the *Tat* Circle, though now a little dated, is still a helpful point of reference for those interested in Kracauer’s class-theoretical reflections. His own Marxist approach notwithstanding, Fritzsche challenged some of Kracauer’s positions, notably by pointing out that, in conventional sociological terms, Kracauer’s salaried employees did not in fact form a unitary social group but represented a range of mutually attenuating or even contradictory social positions and perspectives. What united the jumble of “the bourgeois lower and established middle class, salaried employees, civil servants, notably the cultured and well educated and the bourgeois intelligentsia,” were primarily ideological features: “bourgeois lower middle-class traditions, pronounced self-esteem, [and] desperate resistance against the exterior social world and its destruction of basic values and dispossession” of people like themselves. What Kracauer had portrayed was the “entire spectrum of those who considered themselves the ‘middle class’” and who felt threatened by both capitalism and Communism.²⁰

Kracauer himself had in fact arrived at a similar conclusion. The middle classes did not constitute a solid bloc located at the middle of a scale of social groups defined by their income, wealth and social status but comprised a range of diverse groups. What they had in common above all else was their resentful attitude towards other social groups and their fear of loss of status.²¹ Instead

19. This analysis tapped into a well-established Marxist trope regarding the *petit bourgeoisie*. As Marx noted in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, “Because he belongs to the petty bourgeoisie, i.e., an *intermediate* class in which the interests of two classes mutually blunt each other, the democrat imagines that he stands above the class antagonism.” Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” [1852], 133.

20. Fritzsche, *Politische Romantik und Gegenrevolution*, 66.

21. Notably after the Second World War, Kracauer occasionally went as far as to claim that middle-class ideology had in fact penetrated society in its entirety: “In pre-Nazi Germany, middle-class penchants penetrated all strata; they competed with the political aspirations of the Left and also filled the voids of the upper-class mind.” Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 8. His erstwhile student Theodor W. Adorno, in turn, extended this generalization to encompass all of post-war West German society: “What Kracauer diagnosed in 1930 as the culture of

of an elaborate theory of the middle class, he presented a range of observations from the vantage of the critique of ideology focussing on the nexus between the justified fear of immiseration and various kinds of crises, on the one hand, and the ideological construct of the imperilled middle class, on the other, a well-known construct to this day: the middle classes have nothing but contempt for those higher up yet like to bully those of lower social rank, and they dislike both Marxism and liberalism, both class solidarity and capitalist competition. This left them wide open to all manner of ideologies that claim to offer a remedy for their sense of disorientation and marginalization and affirmed their delusions of grandeur. Ideologies predicated on notions of religious and/or racial superiority were only too happy to step into the breach.

In *The Salaried Masses*, Kracauer characterized this non-class above all in terms of the vacuousness of its concepts:

The mass of salaried employees differs from the labour proletariat in that they are intellectually homeless. It cannot, for now, find its way to join the proletarian comrades, and the edifice of bourgeois ideas and sentiments it has hitherto inhabited has collapsed because the economic development has deprived it of its foundations. It currently lives with no doctrine to look and aspire to, with no goal it might descry. Hence, it lives in fear of lifting up its eyes and asking its way in earnest. Nothing is more characteristic of this life, to the extent that it can be called life, than its way of perceiving of the sublime: not as substance but as glamour, not by means of concentration but of distraction.²²

salaried employees—the institutional and psychological superstructure that fooled the white-collar proletarians teetering on the precipice into thinking they were something special and thus secured their allegiance to the bourgeoisie—has since, given long-standing economic growth, turned into the universal ideology of a society that mistakes itself for a unitary middle-class people.” Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, 19–20 (translation amended). Others have cited Kracauer’s insights to stress that the constant reference to the middle classes detracts attention from the continued existence of a precarious lower class. See Kadritze, *Mythos “Mitte,”* 36–40. This certainly tallies with the fact that Kracauer was concerned with the distinction between workers and salaried employees only in terms of the illusory way in which the ideology he identified as that of the salaried employees drew this distinction.

22. Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses*, 88 (translation amended).

What started out as the glamour and distraction offered by the capitalist leisure industry eventually fed into the glamour of the seemingly unifying cult of the Führer. In a short piece written at roughly the same time as Kracauer was studying the salaried masses, Ernst Bloch noted, in a similar vein, that white-collar workers “allow themselves to be diverted, by cinema or race, so that they do not collect themselves”;²³ collect themselves both in the plain sense of the term and in the sense of coming together to assert their political and economic interests (Bloch’s word play in this instance does not work in English). Constant diversion filled the void created by political ignorance, lack of social awareness, economic precarity and historical hopelessness. There was obviously no ignoring the enormous challenges post-war German society faced, yet this awareness translated only into a desperate sense of isolation and meaninglessness. The neo-religious movements too, Kracauer stressed, were able to conceive of the sublime merely as glamour, not as substance. They peddled invented traditions with a pretence of archaic religious authenticity that turned out, on closer inspection, to lack all substance.

If so many lamented an insufficient sense of orientation, the causes were neither existential nor ontological in nature but historical, social and economic, Kracauer explained. Yet he consistently rejected the “vulgar-Marxist doctrine” that “cultural contents merely form a superstructure above the relevant socio-economic base, so that it is not their claim to truth that is investigated but merely the conditions in which they arise.”²⁴ Such content existed in its own right.²⁵ “Theology exists,” Kracauer insisted, “and for me, . . . the word eternal has real meaning.” However, “for heaven’s sake,” its contemplation “must not be allowed to divert attention from the material” realm.²⁶ Ideas needed to be interpreted in conjunction with their social context since one could not understand the former without considering the latter.

23. Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, 22.

24. Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses*, 103 (translation amended).

25. On Kracauer’s concept of content (Gehalt), see Biebl, “Verbaute Passagen,” 75.

26. Kracauer, “Zwei Arten der Mitteilung,” 181. See also Martins, “Märchenhafter Materialismus”; Martins, “Religious Encounters in Profane Spaces.”

The Neo-Religious Discourse in the Early 1920s: Kracauer, Anthroposophy and Eugen Diederichs

As we saw, a decade earlier, Kracauer had himself been in the grip of the very yearning he criticized in 1929/30. In what follows, I will chart the development leading from this point of departure to his subsequent critique. Kracauer's own quest for a spiritual refuge led him to survey the esoteric marketplace of the early 1920s and dive head-first into what has been called the "modern German occult revival."²⁷

While research on esotericism in the narrower sense of the word would certainly benefit from engaging with Kracauer and Diederichs, my focus in this article is not specifically on esotericism or the occult but on a slightly broader frame of reference. The developments I discuss were not limited to the spiritistic, astrological or theosophical scenes, but also made themselves felt in humanities departments and specific Jewish and Christian denominational trends. They were underpinned by a shared sense of spiritual renewal combined, paradoxically, with the desire to recover one's roots in a supposedly lost past. Kracauer himself frequently characterized this phenomenon as one of "religious renewal," a concept he adopted from his early philosophical role model Max Scheler (1874–1928).²⁸ Hence my preference for the term neo-religious. The range of Kracauer's own spiritual explorations gives some indication of just how many iterations there were of this neo-religious yearning. Anthroposophy, to which I will turn in due course, was merely one such iteration, albeit one that was particularly conspicuous.

Kracauer's desperate longing for some kind of compelling, objective meaning to which individuals could not but yield bore unmistakable authoritarian traits from the outset. In the immediate post-war years, he lamented the spread of

27. See, for example, Treitel, *A Science for the Soul*; Staudenmaier, "Esoteric Alternatives in Imperial Germany"; pertinent transnational studies include Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*; Myers, "Affinity and Estrangement."

28. A Jewish convert to Catholicism, Scheler felt increasingly alienated from established Catholicism in later life. He held the chair in philosophy and sociology at Cologne University until 1928, when he was appointed professor of philosophy at Frankfurt but died before he was able to take up the position. Kracauer, "Catholicism and Relativism" [1921], 203; Scheler, "The Renewal of Religion," 107–356.

individualism and craved authentic authority and a “master of the path,” a leader whose soul was all-encompassing and who therefore “brings the community closer to attaining an ideal state.”²⁹ He assumed that a religious community would form around a master of this kind and thought he had found it in the congregation of the charismatic Frankfurt-based rabbi Nehemias Anton Nobel, who was “all spirit—what others teach, he *was*.”³⁰ Yet, Nobel died in 1921. Kracauer went on to pen extremely interesting contemporaneous eye-witness accounts of other prominent religious charismatics of the interwar years such as Hermann Keyserling and Rudolf Steiner, whom he promptly rejected as false prophets. In addition, he observed various gatherings of Catholic academics, education reform activists and the youth movement.³¹

One cannot help wondering to what extent the concepts Kracauer developed in his treatment of the salaried masses a decade later may usefully be applied to this earlier ideological labyrinth. Since the late 1920s, it has been widely held that the natural habitat of occultism (as opposed to more traditional rural superstition) is found at the lower end of the urban bourgeois spectrum.³² Yet, the evidence for this contention has tended to be anecdotal. While several

29. Kracauer, “Das Wesen des politischen Führers” [1921], 214.

30. Kracauer, letter to Leo Löwenthal, 24 January 1922, in *In steter Freundschaft*, 35. See also Heuberger, *Rabbi Nehemiah Anton Nobel*; Später, *Siegfried Kracauer*, 79–85; Sauter, Kasten, and Martins, eds., *Die Bibelübersetzung von Buber-Rosenzweig*, 15–18, 54–56.

31. Kracauer scholars to date have paid little or no attention to his dealings with, and reception of, the *Tat* Circle, Hermann Keyserling or Rudolf Steiner. Yet, as I show in Part II of “*Um Himmels willen*,” they were central to his critique of esotericism. For example, Harry Craver, while discussing Kracauer’s dealings with Catholicism and Protestantism and a range of religious authors, has paid only very limited attention to his esoteric affinities. Craver, *Reluctant Skeptic*. Jared Poley has characterized Kracauer’s analysis of authoritarian, morbid and dark tendencies in German cinema as an “occult study” in the sense that Kracauer engaged in “the reading of esoteric signs for deeper knowledge and meaning,” but he makes no reference to Kracauer’s encounters with occultism or occult influences on Weimar cinema. Poley, “Siegfried Kracauer, Spirit, and the Soul of Weimar Germany,” 86. Peter S. Fisher looks specifically at the Weimar-era use of psychics in criminalistics: *Weimar Controversies*, 17–66.

32. Will-Erich Peuckert, “Okkultismus,” 1227, 1230. On Peuckert, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 315–17.

studies have confirmed its validity in the case of specific groups active around the turn of the century,³³ the same cannot be said for the period from 1914 onwards. Rudolf Steiner's (1861–1925) Anthroposophical Society would seem an obvious case in point for the state of play in this intermediate period.³⁴ In 1913, it seceded from the supposedly alien and “Eastern” Theosophical Society Adyar to proclaim a more German and Christian form of esotericism. Steiner's branch of the Theosophical Society had comprised a few hundred members who mostly belonged to the upper-middle class or the aristocracy. After the First World War, he suddenly had a mass following. To be sure, many had only a superficial grasp of what he was about and soon lost interest but even so, the change was dramatic. Most of the new followers were neither aristocrats nor factory workers but indeed middle-class intellectuals, students, salaried employees, and civil servants, many of whom had recently been subject to upward or downward social mobility. As Steiner reached the peak of his fame in 1921/22, the anthroposophical movement certainly piqued Kracauer's curiosity and it remained a significant focal point for him for some time to come.³⁵

In 1921, *Die Tat* published a special issue on anthroposophy comprising contributions by both Steiner supporters and detractors.³⁶ We know that

33. See Bigalke, *Lebensreform und Esoterik um 1900*.

34. See Zander, *Anthroposophie in Deutschland*, 362–80; Rudolf Steiner.

35. “The anthroposophical movement, whose principal German base is currently Stuttgart,” Kracauer wrote in February 1921, “is making initial forays into Frankfurt” (“Rudolf Steiners Geheimwissenschaft,” 3). Kracauer then reported from an anthroposophical conference held in Darmstadt in July of that year. See Steiner, *Die Aufgabe der Anthroposophie Gegenüber Wissenschaft und Leben*, Kracauer, “Anthroposophie und Wissenschaft,” 256–65. Subsequent articles on the topic included “Rudolf Steiner und Seine Jünger”; “Dr. Rudolf Steiner in Frankfurt”; “Zum Tode Rudolf Steiners.” These were followed mainly by reviews of relevant books and public lectures: “Moderne Theosophie”; “Neuere Literatur zur Anthroposophie”; “Der Abendländische Zeus”; “Anthroposophie und Christentum.” After the Second World War, Kracauer seems to have left it, at least in print, at one final sideswipe: “In their dread of being left in the open, scores of people rushed to mushroom prophets, who were to sink into oblivion a few years later. The theosophist Rudolf Steiner was a particular rage of the time; he resembled Hitler in that he zealously advertised inflated visions in execrable, petty-bourgeois German.” *From Caligari to Hitler*, 107.

36. There was some measure of direct overlap between the *Tat* Circle and the anthroposophical

Kracauer was intensely familiar with at least one of the contributions, a critical assessment of Steiner by the far-left Catholic theologian Ernst Michel, because, in 1923, he discussed a lecture by Michel on the same topic which, going by Kracauer's summary, was either identical or very similar to the article in *Die Tat*.³⁷ In the early 1920s, Kracauer's own religious stance would by no means have been out of place in *Die Tat*, and his assessment of anthroposophy did not differ markedly from that of the critical contributors to the journal's special issue on the topic. One could "hardly ignore anthroposophical doctrine,"³⁸ he wrote, and this not only because it had become so ubiquitous. To be sure, it did little more than offer some measure of diversion to those searching for meaning. One needed to acknowledge, however, that Steiner had an "extraordinary nose" for the intellectual and spiritual void that troubled so many and that he offered a unified, albeit daemonic, concept of nature and spirit.³⁹ Hence, "One can understand why many people fall prey to this kind of temptation."⁴⁰

Eugen Diederichs,⁴¹ editor and publisher of *Die Tat*, would not have disagreed. Anthroposophy, he wrote in the special issue, was a transitional phenomenon and not a new beginning. As such, it posed a "threat to the substantiation of

movement. See Staudenmaier, *Between Occultism and Nazism*, 82–83. In addition to the relevant publications named by Staudenmaier, see also Bauer, "Geheimsschulung nach Steiner," On *Die Tat* and the *Tat* Circle, see Fritzsche, *Politische Romantik*; Sontheimer, "Der Tatkreis"; Stark, *Entrepreneurs of Ideology*; Woods, *The Conservative Revolution in the Weimar Republic*, 88–100; Hanke and Hübinger, "Von der 'Tat'-Gemeinde zum 'Tat'-Kreis"; Hübinger, "*Die Tat* und der *Tat*-Kreis."

37. See Kracauer, "Anthroposophie und Christentum"; Michel, "Anthroposophie und Christentum." Although Steiner dismissed Michel as a Catholic dogmatic and Dadaist, the two had rather more in common than either would have cared to admit. Steiner, *Die Verantwortung des Menschen für die Weltentwicklung*, 215–19. See, as a case in point, Michel, *Weltanschauung und Naturdeutung*. The Vatican placed several works by Michel on the index. On Michel, see Groß, Hainz, Klehr, and Michel, eds., *Weltverantwortung des Christen*, on his background in Frankfurt, see Lowitsch, *Der Kreis um die Rhein-Mainische Volkszeitung*, 36–39; on Kracauer and Michel, see Craver, *Reluctant Skeptic*, 71, 175–81.

38. Kracauer, "Those Who Wait," 132.

39. Kracauer, "Anthroposophie und Christentum," 260.

40. Kracauer, "Those Who Wait," 133.

41. For Diederichs's self-understanding, see Eugen Diederichs, *Aus meinem Leben*.

the coming Germany,” and it was for this very reason that one urgently needed to subject it to critical scrutiny. It was, after all, “such an obvious option just now to seek refuge atop a secure tower from the chaos of what is emerging.”⁴²

While both Kracauer and Diederichs presented themselves as concerned commentators who scrutinized intellectual and spiritual renewal movements on behalf of “the coming Germany,” in stark contrast to Kracauer, Diederichs maintained a “secure tower” of his own: the Eugen Diederichs publishing enterprise in Jena.⁴³ A Diederichs publishing enterprise producing religious literature still exists, but its early-twentieth-century predecessor was not just some publisher, it was as vogueish an enterprise as anthroposophy. It published the complete or collected works of various philosophers, substantial collections of fairy tales, (neo-)religious and secular literature and books by authors from the religious socialist and völkisch spectrums. Notably in the areas of ethnography and folklore studies, its academic impact was considerable,⁴⁴ but Diederichs’s success rested above all on his ability to present these topics to a broad middle-class readership in an accessible manner. In his capacity as a moderator and mediator of contemporary ideas, Diederichs was able to punch far above his weight, and for the authors and publicists of the neo-religious scene all ways led to Diederichs; so too for Kracauer, a one-time contributor to *Die Tat* and frequent reviewer of Diederichs publications, and for Steiner, who sought to publish one of his books with Diederichs.⁴⁵

42. Diederichs, “Zum anthroposophischen Sonderheft.” For Steiner’s harnished response, see Steiner, *Die Verantwortung des Menschen*, 200–24. The fact that the anthroposophical journal *Die Drei* still placed an advertisement in *Die Tat* a year later suggests that Steiner was unable to warn all his supporters off *Die Tat*.

43. See Stark, *Entrepreneurs of Ideology*, 58–110, and passim; Viehöfen, *Der Verleger als Organisator*; Hübinger, ed., *Versammlungsort Moderner Geister*; Heidler, *Der Verleger Eugen Diederichs und Seine Welt (1896–1930)*; Ulbricht and Werner, eds., *Romantik, Revolution und Reform*; Triebel, *Der Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1930–1949*; Diederichs, *Eugen Diederichs und Sein Verlag*; Werner, *Germany’s Other Modernism*.

44. See Niem, *Eugen Diederichs und die Volkskunde*.

45. See Steiner, letter to Eugen Diederichs, 14 May 1904, in Ulf Diederichs, ed., *Eugen Diederichs*, 145–46. In *Die Verantwortung des Menschen*, 211–13, Steiner claimed he had never shown any interest in Diederichs as a publisher.

Even so, the Diederichs publishing house did have its own religion of sorts, albeit one whose appeal owed more to its syncretism and universal compatibility than its originality. Meike Werner has argued that Diederichs's eventual decision to settle in Jena was owed not (only) to pragmatic considerations but to programmatic concerns too. While the likes of Kracauer and Walter Benjamin identified metropolitan centres such as Frankfurt or Berlin as the true loci of modernity, Diederichs consciously opted for a provincial city—albeit a city that was home to one of Germany's most prestigious universities—because, to his mind, it embodied an alternative modernity not tied to urbanism.⁴⁶ Jena supposedly stood not for acceleration and rationalization but for poetic charm and soulful profundity. This was, of course, a thoroughly lopsided perception that presupposed the deconstruction and reinterpretation of other intellectual and academic traditions that were or had been equally at home in the city.⁴⁷ While the penchant for a vision of provincial modernity was shared by some liberals and leftists, it was fundamentally Romanticist in nature, and Diederichs was by no means alone in charging his ideal of provincial modernity with antisemitic tropes.

Indeed, Diederichs coined the term neo-Romanticism and sought to outline a distinctly German and this-worldly pantheism that scanned artistic output for traces of the divine and conceived of God as residing in the individual and in nature. Monotheism and belief in the afterlife, by contrast, he dismissed as Jewish and alien.⁴⁸ His antisemitic rejection of the “Jehovah-God” and his call to find God within was rounded off by a metaphysics of history drawing on Joachim of Fiore's doctrine of the three kingdoms:

The redemptive word will come, for the third empire is nigh. All we can do now is seek solitude and prepare to hear our inner voice, which God uses to call out. For in

46. Werner, *Germany's Other Modernism*, 6–16. Analogously, both the anthroposophists and Keyserling's School of Wisdom liked to congregate in Darmstadt, a quaint former royal residence offering plenty of attractive Art Nouveau architecture.

47. Werner, *Germany's Other Modernism*, 10–11.

48. See Ulbricht, “‘Deutsche Religion’ und ‘Deutsche Kunst’,” 35.

the third empire, the experience of God will be more profound, it has transcended the Jehovah-God, the God of hosts enthroned on high, because its concept of God is more spiritualized. This experience will require no notion of a Father God because it will observe God's symbols in the occurrences of life and God himself in ideas.⁴⁹

Young Kracauer was no stranger to such ideas about “waiting” and inner “self-preparation” as a sort of golden mean between short-circuited dogmatism and principled skepticism, nor to eclecticism and pantheistic tendencies.⁵⁰ He envisaged the possibility of straddling the chasm between spirit and nature, of “eavesdropping on the ancient God Pan.” The visible light of this world was the smile of the Gnostic Sophia.⁵¹ Yet Kracauer was able to entertain these ideas without the complementary antisemitism: “Hasidic mysticism (according to [Martin] Buber) too sought and found the Shekhinah in nature,” he wrote to Leo Löwenthal in 1922.⁵² Diederichs, by contrast, strained all the ideological tenets he assimilated through a filter that ensured they conformed sufficiently to his pronounced völkisch nationalism and anti-intellectualism, as well as his slightly less pronounced antisemitism. In the introduction to *Politik des Geistes* (Politics of the Spirit, 1920), a collection of his contributions to *Die Tat*, he stated his position as follows:

True politics maintains the health of the national spirit. Everyone can contribute to this task, initially by beginning to stay spiritually healthy themselves. In this vein, what I wrote down quite inadvertently turned into an inner grappling with “my truth.” Never have I been a chauvinist, nor bourgeois, nor a critic or radical detractor for the sake of some “ism.” Since we need “visions,” not “opinions,” criticism that does not come with a constructive idea is, to my mind, redundant.⁵³

This was certainly too affirmative for Kracauer's liking; he did not buy that one constantly needed to be positive and constructive. It was important to be “able

49. Eugen Diederichs, “Das Kommen des dritten Reiches,” 99.

50. Kracauer, “Those Who Wait,” 139.

51. Kracauer, letter to Leo Löwenthal, 16 October 1921, in *In steter Freundschaft*, 26.

52. Kracauer, letter to Leo Löwenthal, 9 March 1922, in *In steter Freundschaft*, 41.

53. Eugen Diederichs, “Zum Geleit!,” 1.

to stick it out” among the negative, and some things deserved only criticism.⁵⁴ Diederichs wanted to be more hands-on. His ideal was “the man rooted in fact who is intent on lending life an increasingly organic structure.” His foes, conversely, were the “leaders of intellectualism” and the materialist spirit of the masses which, on his account, were at home in soulless America. To avert Germany’s Americanization, the “democratic idea” needed “to bring together and penetrate liberal individualism, the conservative notion of organic configuration and the socialist concept of community so that a state of the Volk may be created.”⁵⁵ In spiritual terms, the Politics of the Spirit were predicated on the “Christ idea” and the willingness, encapsulated in that idea, to make sacrifices, as well as the determination “to follow through in earnest on the demands of Goethe, Schiller and their contemporaries.” This would allow the God lying dormant in nature to be reawakened within us: “Each one of us must ensure they develop in keeping with their intellectual and spiritual core. . . . The religious requirement of our times is to be truthful, for this is the only way of serving the spirit.”⁵⁶

“Nationhood! Goethe! Mythos!” Diederichs, Martin Buber and Kracauer’s Turn of 1926

Although Kracauer would have been a good fit as a Diederichs author in the early 1920s, in the event, he occasionally published articles in *Deutscher Pfeiler* (German Pylon), a journal published by former editors of *Die Tat* whom Diederichs had pressured into leaving,⁵⁷ but only one text in *Die Tat*—a review of Martin Buber’s magnum opus, *Ich und Du* (I and Thou, 1923).⁵⁸ The

54. Kracauer, “Those Who Wait,” 139 (translation amended).

55. Eugen Diederichs, “Deutschlands Aufgabe,” 166–67.

56. Eugen Diederichs, “400 Jahre Reformation,” 94.

57. The brothers Ernst and August Horneffer established *Die Tat* in 1909. Beginning in 1912 and notably during the war, Diederichs acquired his dominant role and tried to increase the journal’s circulation. See Diederichs, *Eugen Diederichs und sein Verlag*, 347. In addition to the two previously identified texts “Rudolf Steiner” and “Moderne Theosophie,” Kracauer published a third text in the Horneffer’s subsequent journal, *Deutscher Pfeiler: Neue Folge des “Unsichtbaren Tempels”*: “Der Graf Cagliostro.”

58. See Mendes-Flohr, *Martin Buber*.

religious philosopher Buber had published his *Ekstatische Konfessionen* (Ecstatic Confessions, 1909), an anthology of mystical texts from various world religions, with Diederichs. While Buber and Diederichs were both interested in medieval mysticism,⁵⁹ Buber, who was unable to convince the antisemite Diederichs that there was such a thing as “Jewish mysticism” too,⁶⁰ subsequently, depending on one’s vantage, either turned his back on the neo-religious discourse or developed his own Jewish variant of that discourse. *I and Thou* is now considered a work of Jewish philosophy, yet in his review of the work published in *Die Tat* in 1923, Kracauer stressed that “in this book, Buber does not speak as a Jew.” Instead, he offered “generally valid answers to general human questions.”⁶¹

At the time, Kracauer still agreed with Diederichs and Buber on certain issues. Three years later, he broke with them and publicly at that. In his review of *I and Thou*, he initially praised the central plank of Buber’s account, his emphasis on the Thou, on dialogue, on the genuinely meaningful encounter, on God as the Eternal Thou.⁶² He had misgivings, however, about the way in which Buber dismissed the material, profane, external world and everyday life as a frigid “It world.” Did he not, in so doing, “leapfrog precisely the concrete reality that he . . . seeks to grasp?”⁶³ Three years later, this question mark had turned into an exclamation mark. As he explained in his critical review of the first volume of Buber and Rosenzweig’s translation of the Tanakh, truth now resided “in the profane realms in which a social critique (no matter how abstract) is more at home than a contemplation of reality that skips over it.”⁶⁴ By now,

59. See Ulbricht, “Mystik und Deutschtumsmetaphysik”; Groiser, “Einleitung,” 13–43.

60. Buber, letter to Eugen Diederichs, 21 February 1907, in *Briefwechsel aus Sieben Jahrzehnten*, vol. 1, 253. See also Groiser, “Einleitung,” 22; Mendes-Flohr, “Fin de siècle Orientalism, the *Ostjuden*, and the Aesthetics of Jewish Self-Affirmation,” 89. Buber played a crucial role in creating the notion of the Kabbalistic tradition as the Jewish variant of the ostensible anthropological constant “mysticism” that scholars are currently deconstructing. See Huss, *Mystifying Kabbalah*, 1, 45–50.

61. Kracauer, “Martin Buber,” 678.

62. Buber, “Ich und Du,” 82.

63. Kracauer, “Martin Buber,” 683.

64. Kracauer, “The Bible in German,” 200 (translation amended). On the ensuing controversy,

Kracauer had found a new home in social criticism and become an adherent of the Marxist critique of ideology. Their translation was a work of “archaizing neo-Romanticism,” he noted, and it exemplified the “loss of substance” that resulted when supposedly sacred or “esoteric” language was deployed in the present.⁶⁵ Given that Diederichs had popularized the term neo-Romanticism, this also amounted to an obvious sideswipe at him.

On 26 April 1926, one day before the publication of his damning review of the Buber-Rosenzweig translation, Kracauer had savaged an announcement published by the Diederichs publishing enterprise in the German book trade’s leading periodical. It bore the heading “Nationhood! Goethe! Mythos!” and announced the second of three Religious Propaganda Weeks.⁶⁶ Each was devoted to one of the themes indicated in the heading and associated with a matching book series: the (German) Nationhood series and the Goethe-inspired God-Nature series, as well as a third series that was still being prepared by the “Mythos group.”⁶⁷ The three series would mark the consummation of his three decades as a publisher and, “once the third group is announced, the purpose of my labours as a publisher will be encapsulated in the motto: The German countenance whose foremost embodiment is the man Goethe.”⁶⁸ The publications would fortify the German spirit against the threat of American materialism.

“What do I hope to achieve with another Propaganda Week? Might it be my intention to sermonize about the range of available books or play the preceptor of the book trade?”

see Sauter, Kasten, and Martins, eds., *Die Bibelübersetzung von Buber-Rosenzweig*; Jay, “Politics of Translation”; Lesch and Lesch, “Verbindungen zu einer anderen Frankfurter Schule”; Askani, *Das Problem der Übersetzung*, 263–81; Britt, “Romantic Roots of the Debate on the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible”; Beck and Coomann, “Adorno, Kracauer und die Ursprünge der Jargonkritik”; Kasten, “Mit Luther Gegen Luther”; Kasten, “‘Art Must Become Pious or End’; Sauter, “‘Ein Modernes Verdeutschungs-Unternehmen’.”

65. Kracauer, “The Bible in German,” 196, 194 (translation amended).

66. Diederichs, “Volkheit! Goethe! Mythos!”

67. In the event, by far the most effort went into the Nationhood series. See Niemi, *Eugen Diederichs*, 331–36.

68. Diederichs, “Volkheit! Goethe! Mythos!”

Diederichs asked rhetorically. Surely not. And yet, he insisted that book publishers faced a stark alternative:

‘Service to the book and, consequently, to the nation, or Americanization’. . . . Anyone who appreciates this as I do also knows that my announcements are meant for those from the same sphere . . . , no books are loudly extolled here, at issue are intellectual goals and tasks of concern to every German. . . . The task is to foster the seeds of renewal, this has nothing to do with the pursuit of some hobby horse or desire to play the know-it-all.⁶⁹

Kracauer mocked the fact that the announcement was neither fish nor fowl. On the one hand, Diederichs effectively claimed to be doing God’s bidding purely from inspiration and conviction. On the other hand, he could not do without pointing to the books he produced, books which, whatever their inherent value, he also needed to sell. Consequently, the announcement was also part advertisement, but it was so bashful about it that it did a disservice to the very contents that, on Diederichs’s account, so urgently needed to see the light of day: “One quivers with fear for the seeds he has found,” Kracauer wrote, “given how carelessly he waters them here.”⁷⁰ Diederichs’s self-stylization rested on the relegation of all that was profane—and, by implication, though unconsciously so, of his own dealings in and with the profane—to the bogeyman of Americanization. This offered Kracauer plenty of low-hanging fruit for his mockery, and he just needed to re-arrange Diederichs’s own words to render them ridiculous:⁷¹

His struggle in the appeal targets the Americanization of the corpus of books available in Germany, on God’s behalf. . . . So what is appropriate to such an age? What, one wonders, would be in God’s spirit today? The answer: the Religious Propaganda Weeks organized by Eugen Diederichs. Apparently, these un-American weeks have shielded fledgling shoots from Americanization twice before. To console us, the announcement informs us that, “a

69. Diederichs, “Volkheit! Goethe! Mythos!”

70. Kracauer, “Volkheit! Goethe! Mythos!,” 371.

71. Kracauer’s immanent critique of texts on their own terms was reminiscent of the method deployed by the Viennese giant of literary criticism and critical journalism Karl Kraus. It prefigured the Frankfurt School’s conviction that the critique of ideology was inseparable from the critique of language. See Djassemi, *Der “Produktgehalt kritischer Zerstörerarbeit”*; Beck and Coomann, “Adorno, Kracauer und die Ursprünge der Jargonkritik.”

third Religious Propaganda Week is yet to come in the autumn, whose motto is ‘Mythos’.” One would like to congratulate their discoverer on these splendid terminological clusters, were it not for the fact that he claims not to be responsible for them. For he states modestly: “All such formulations were not willed by me, they have emanated from the work for inner development since the war, from the work of many creative forces in Germany whom I have taken it upon myself to organize as a bookseller.”⁷²

This he set out to do, Kracauer ridiculed, “with the help of the pious weeks for the prevention of Americanization.”⁷³

1926 was the year in which Kracauer broke with the remaining big players on the neo-religious scene whom he had not already cut down (Steiner was among the latter). As he intensified his critique of their endeavours, he developed an idiosyncratic Messianic theo-political vantage in a Marxist vein.⁷⁴ Not that he had any time for the leftist parties and organized Marxism. Nor was the extraction and exegesis of programmatic proof texts from Marx’s works what he had in mind. His attention to significant transformations and innovations embodied, for example, by the middle classes was principally that of a social scientist.

The “New” *Tat* and the “Revolt of the Middle Classes”

Die Tat, meanwhile, moved not to the left but emphatically to the right, largely abandoning religion as a theme and focussing increasingly on the “middle” of society. Under Diederichs, *Die Tat* enjoyed only a modest circulation. When he gave up the draining editorship in 1928/29, he was initially succeeded in this capacity by Adam Kuckhoff, a progressive liberal. Eventually, the Young Conservative Hans Zehrer (1899–1966) took over for good.⁷⁵ By 1932, the circulation had increased to 30,000. Its principal authors now formed the

72. Kracauer, “Volkheit! Goethe! Mythos!,” 371. The quotations were not entirely correct, but Kracauer’s minor deviations did not affect the meaning.

73. Kracauer, “Volkheit! Goethe! Mythos!,” 372.

74. See Martins, “Märchenhafter Materialismus”; Martins, “Religious Encounters.”

75. See Demant, *Hans Zehrer als politischer Publizist von Schleicher zu Springer*.

infamous *Tat* Circle (Diederich tried to create a similar semi-formal *Tat* circle in 1915, but to no avail).⁷⁶ The so-called new *Tat* still embraced myth and mysticism, but it propagated a more political form of nationalism and engaged directly with fascism and National Socialism. As he wrote to Zehrer in 1929, Diederichs was not entirely happy with this development:

There are no genuinely fundamental points of disagreement. I am truly grateful for the way in which you are running the *Tat*. . . . After all, I approve of any kind of one-sidedness in a militant journal. . . . We should talk about religion another time. . . . Under my editorship the *Tat* was really a religious journal, notably where the word religion did not actually feature. . . . Consequently, I would maintain that, alongside its sociological vantage, the *Tat* should primarily tend to the irrational, i.e., religion and the arts.⁷⁷

Yet Diederichs died a year later, and *Die Tat* no longer needed to show him any consideration. It now nailed its flag firmly to the mast of German Socialism and the Total National Community, promoting a long-established synthesis of völkisch state theory, socialist collectivism and capitalist concepts of property which it popularized further until the Nazis were able to reap the benefits.⁷⁸

In 1931, having since developed his own theory of what moved and motivated salaried employees, Kracauer applied his insights to a detailed discussion of the new *Tat*, “Revolt of the Middle Classes.” The supporters of the *Tat* Circle were middle-class intellectuals, firstly, because it explicitly promoted middle-class interests and, secondly, because the approach and stance of the journal was fundamentally shaped by petit-bourgeois individualism.⁷⁹ There is certainly no

76. Cf. footnote 36.

77. Eugen Diederichs, letter to Hans Zehrer, 2 December 1929, in Diederichs, *Eugen Diederichs: Selbstzeugnisse und Briefe*, 310–11. See Ulbricht, “‘Deutsche Religion’ und ‘Deutsche Kunst,’” 51; Fritzsche, *Politische Romantik*, 54.

78. For an accurate survey, see Werth, *Sozialismus und Nation*, 143–69.

79. See Kracauer, “Revolt of the Middle Classes.” Später (*Siegfried Kracauer*, 268) has suggested that Kracauer was motivated to write this six-part article for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* by a letter he received from a student who suggested that Kracauer ought really to be a contributor to *Die Tat*. Needless to say, Kracauer hardly needed to be alerted to the periodical’s existence; indeed, he had recommended it on two occasions as recently as 1929. See Kracauer, “Zeitschriften-Schau,”

denying that the journal positively fetishized the middle classes and the ostensible “middle” of society. It also featured a harsh critique of Kracauer’s *Salaried Masses*.⁸⁰

The political theology of the “middle” propagated by *Die Tat* and its contributors and supporters is epitomized by the text quoted most frequently in Kracauer’s “Revolt of the Middle Classes”: Zehrer’s “Rechts oder Links?” (Right or Left?) of 1931. Zehrer too conceived of the middle classes as an assemblage of various groups (“civil servants, salaried employees, businesspeople, small leaseholders, intellectual professions etc.”) that defied a clear-cut political classification. They were receptive “neither to liberalistic nor to conservativistic or socialist attempts to regiment them,” lacked awareness and organization as a group and thought of themselves as being in transition as they aspired to bourgeois existence. “Fascism was first able to assert itself in a practical manner” in Italy “because of its sociological base in the middle classes.” In Germany, the latter had the potential to create the space that “ideals, intellectual zest and enthusing myths” might inhabit. No “trades union, association or class” would help them merge “with the community at large, the people and the nation.” Only ideals and myths could facilitate this. In order to have “sufficient substance and plasticity,” myth needed to create “a theoretical synthesis of the forces of the left and the right.” If the “middle” adopted the right-wing ideal of the total state (as expounded by Carl Schmitt) and the left-wing ideal of the planned economy, it would achieve the hoped-for mythologically underpinned nationalist reconstruction of society.⁸¹

126, 131. It seems more likely, however, that the article was a response to a review of Kracauer’s book on salaried employees: Eschmann, “Die Angestellten.”

80. Eschmann, “Die Angestellten.” Eschmann praised Kracauer’s survey but lamented his ironic style and accused him of Marxist historical determinism (see Band, *Mittelschichten*, 209–10). Kracauer actually rejected Marxism’s determinism as an extension of the “philosophy of totality” to which he juxtaposed his empirically saturated method of “constituting” a representation of reality with the help of “a machine gun volley of tiny intuitions.” See Kracauer, letter to Theodor W. Adorno, 29 May 1930, in *Correspondence, 1923–1966*, 145 (translation amended).

81. Zehrer, “Rechts oder Links?,” 532. Zehrer essentially reiterated the position of the journal’s aforementioned editor Ernst Wilhelm Eschmann (1904–1987). Eschmann, who completed his

In “Revolt of the Middle Classes,” Kracauer scrutinized three concepts that featured prominently in the ideology of the *Tat* Circle: 1. Its concept of peoplehood and the notion of a holistic and organic “völkisch totality” that it contrasted to the atomizing individualism of mass society;⁸² 2. Its concept of the space in which the corporeal existence of the national community transpired; 3. Its concept of the state that allowed the national community to persist over time and control the economy. As in his critique of Buber and Rosenzweig’s Tanakh translation, Kracauer reiterated that mythologies were not something one could create or implant at will. Attempts to do so never got beyond propagandistic assertions.

Kracauer primarily wanted to show that the concepts of the *Tat* Circle were counterfactual, remote from reality and self-contradictory. As he had done in his harsh critique of Diederichs in 1926, Kracauer relied on the contradictions inherent in the *Tat* Circle’s own texts to demonstrate the “unreality” of its ideas. How were the circle’s organicist notions of development and growth compatible with its call for a planned economy? How did the circle intend to reconcile its vision of a total state with the pathos it bestowed upon the ideational abundance of the individual, how would it mediate between collectivism and individualism? For Kracauer, this vacillation between opposites offered a perfect illustration of his diagnosis regarding the development of middle-class ideology:

Hence, the publications of the *Tat* Circle precisely reflect the very turmoil in which the dispossessed middle class finds itself due to the material and spiritual circumstances, flung

doctorate under the supervision of the sociologist Alfred Weber, was the *Tat* Circle’s expert on social and economic issues. Following the handover of power to the Nazis in 1933, Eschmann took over as publisher of *Die Tat*, alongside Giseler Wirsing. In 1960, his impressive record as a far-right propagandist and supporter of the Nazi regime notwithstanding, Eschmann was appointed to a chair in philosophy at the University of Münster. In his discussion of the *Tat* Circle, Kracauer referred to two of Eschmann’s articles: “Moderne Soziologien III” and “Übergang zur Gesamtwirtschaft.” See also Eschmann, “Der Faschismus und die Mittelschichten.” For a survey of Eschmann’s prescriptions at this time, see Käser and Steiner, “Academic Discussion or Political Guidance?,” 93–95, 98, 111–12. On Eschmann’s biography, see Plöger, *Soziologie in totalitären Zeiten*.

82. Kracauer, “Revolt of the Middle Classes,” 109 (translation amended).

to and fro between violence and reason as it seeks refuge in Romanticism. This also means, however, that they [the publications of the *Tat* Circle] are incapable of offering the middle class a way out and merely expose the state in which it finds itself.⁸³

Profoundly susceptible to the very liberal individualism they rejected for ideological reasons, yet unable to see their material circumstances for what they were, the *Tat* Circle's yearning for myth and mysticism regressed into anti-humanism:

The intellectual/spiritual battle waged by the *Tat* is therefore at risk, time and again, of degenerating into an unintellectual/unspiritual revolt. It calls the sword an argument, allows blood to triumph over money and is patently inclined to play off the chthonic forces it worships as heroic against any and every consciously fashioned life.⁸⁴

In short: the ideology of the *Tat* Circle mistook the limited rationality of capitalism for reason itself and, unsettled by the former, proceeded to dismiss the latter.

“Consciously fashioned life,” the notion that reason might gently elucidate the “chthonic forces” and find an appropriate place for them—these were tenets crucial to the modest utopian vision developed by the Marxist Kracauer. Surely one first needed to understand society, collect oneself, come together, before one took action and manufactured new myths, Kracauer insisted with mounting desperation. Alas, this insistence stood no chance against the sullen invocation of myth that sought not material change but mere ideological integration.

The sociologist Tilman Reitz has criticized Kracauer's immanent critique of the *Tat* Circle's ideology on the grounds that it did not go beyond “merely exposing errors where he ought to have scrutinized what were powerful ideologies.”⁸⁵ That Kracauer proceeded in this way may be explained not least by the fact that Kracauer assumed he was debating with the contributors to *Die Tat* on an equal footing. Hence, he took recourse not to utopian or socialist but to pragmatic arguments, criticizing some while praising other aspects—including,

83. Kracauer, “Revolt of the Middle Classes,” 124.

84. Kracauer, “Revolt of the Middle Classes,” 123–24.

85. Reitz, “Die Klasse ohne Eigenschaften,” 143.

in principle, the aspiration to bring together forces and ideas positioned on both sides of the political spectrum. Many of the articles in *Die Tat* proceeded in a similar vein. As Kracauer’s biographer, Jörg Später, has pointed out, these were “battles among intellectuals for intellectuals” that were “insignificant when it came to *realpolitik*.”⁸⁶ They were naïve and made no significant impact on those who were engaged in politics proper. Kracauer even gave the call for a leader, which, after the Nazi party’s electoral breakthrough in September 1930 at the latest, had lost a great deal of its innocence (such as it ever was), a Messianic twist: “Invoking a leader does not draw him near, it obviates his advent. It might be eased, if at all, by constantly asking what must to be done.” Leaders owed their authority not to what one assumed they would do but to what they had already achieved by “acting based on knowledge.”⁸⁷

Kracauer may have assumed that the concepts of the *Tat* Circle bore little or no connection to reality, yet the integration of the middle classes into a national mythology with its very own Führer was already well underway. In the event, far from vacillating between violence and reason, the middle classes opted emphatically for the sword as their preferred argument. Stripped of his post in 1933, Kracauer began to focus on other classes too and developed his theory of the middle classes into a theory of fascism.⁸⁸ As it dawned on him what he had previously overlooked, he turned his theory of fascism into a theory of propaganda. The concepts of the *Tat* Circle may have lacked a grip on reality, but totalitarian propaganda simply created its own reality. As Kracauer noted, citing Goebbels, “a world shaped by the art of propaganda becomes as modeling clay—amorphous material lacking any initiative of its own.”⁸⁹

86. Später, *Siegfried Kracauer*, 269.

87. Kracauer, “Revolt of the Middle Classes,” 114–15 (translation amended).

88. See Kracauer, “Die deutschen Bevölkerungsschichten und der Nationalsozialismus”; “Exposé. Masse und Propaganda.”

89. Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 299; *Totalitäre Propaganda; Werke*, vol. 2.2; Moltke, *The Curious Humanist*, 43–78; “Ästhetisierung der Politik. Siegfried Kracauers *Totalitäre Propaganda*”; Agard, “Convergences et Divergences avec l’Institut für Sozialforschung dans *La Propagande Totalitaire*

Epilogue: The Undead Myth of the “Middle” of Society

Kracauer’s initial misjudgement is instructive in a number of important respects, beginning with the importance of not underestimating the impact of hollow ideological claims. His focus on the “middle” of society is also helpful, notably in contrast to conventional theories of extremism. The threat by no means resides (merely) on the fringes of society but at its heart (too); it resides among those who invoke the myth of the ostensible “middle” of society;⁹⁰ in the resentment of those who consider themselves “perfectly normal” and those who seek to mobilize them with their demagoguery.

Kracauer’s theory barely tallies with the notion that it was the insufficient republican enthusiasm of the middle classes that killed the Weimar Republic. As he began to acknowledge in 1933, workers and members of the haute bourgeoisie embraced the Nazis’ Volksgemeinschaft with no less cheer than their middle-class peers. Even so, it continues to be the case that, as opposed to their conventional leftist and right-wing counterparts, fascist movements in Germany and elsewhere are most aptly characterized as articulations of the “extremism of the middle,”⁹¹ in both senses of the word: as the sphere of cozy consensus between the extremes, and the sphere of the economically middling strata of society. Sociologists have certainly documented this beyond any possible doubt for the German case.⁹²

Kracauer’s intellectual biography also demonstrates that middle-class intellectuals of the interwar period were perfectly capable of *not* turning into fascists. To be sure, the yearning for genuine authority led all too many to subscribe to ideologies like those propagated by the *Tat* Circle. Yet Kracauer, despite having set out from

de Siegfried Kracauer”; Lind, “A Cacophony of Critical Voices?,” Baumann, “Des Nouvelles Masses à l’Ornement Totalitaire,” and Abromeit, “Siegfried Kracauer and the Early Frankfurt School’s Analysis of Fascism as Right-Wing Populism,” all in Noppen and Raulet, eds., *Théorie Critique de la ropagande*.

90. Decker and Türcke, “Die Mitte—ein mythischer Ort.”

91. Lipset, *Political Man*.

92. See, *inter alia*, Decker, Kiess, and Brähler, eds., *Rechtsextremismus der Mitte, Flucht ins Autoritäre*.

the same point of departure, took a totally different turn, developing a gentle Messianism of reason that he sought to anchor in a Jewish theology of sorts.

To what extent Kracauer's middle-class theory can usefully be applied to neo-religious movements more generally is less clear. To be sure, in the early 1920s, anthroposophy seems to have made inroads principally in the middle classes, and Kracauer, Buber and the contributors to *Die Tat* were clearly middle-class intellectuals. However, before generalizing these findings, other esoteric movements booming in the immediate post-war years would need to be assessed in detail on a case-by-case basis. Even so, more recent developments would certainly seem to bear out Kracauer's analysis as far as the German context is concerned. The protest movement taking issue with the measures introduced to contain the Covid pandemic was exactly what Kracauer would have expected it to be: an esoteric middle-class movement predicated on a range of conspiracy myths.⁹³

Kracauer actually felt a much greater affinity for the neo-religious movements of the 1920s than the prevalent notion of him as a foundational contributor to Frankfurt School Critical Theory who had uncharitable things at best to say about neo-religious authors such as Steiner and Buber suggests. Among researchers focussing on leftist intellectuals, due attention to the religious, Messianic and esoteric dimensions of their objects of study all too often continues to be a desideratum. Conversely, scholars of esotericism would do well 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.

93. See Nachtwey, Schäfer, and Frei, *Politische Soziologie der Corona-Proteste*, 51; Brunner, Daniel, Knasmüller, Maile, Schadauer, and Stern, *Corona-Protest-Report*; Decker, Kiess, Heller, and Brehler, eds., *Autoritäre Dynamiken in Unsicheren Zeiten*.

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The *Efendi* and the *Shaykh*: Spiritual Easternism in Fin-de-siècle Egypt

Mariam Elashmawy

Mariam.elashmawy@fu-berlin.de

Abstract

This article shows how an Egyptian *shaykh* (religious scholar) from the peasantry class, with a traditional religious education, and a young man belonging to the class of modern-educated Egyptians (*efendiya*) are entangled in the narrative of esotericism in fin-de-siècle Egypt. The *efendi*, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Islambūlī (1905–1964), was the editor of the Easternist periodical *Al-Ma‘rifa*. The *shaykh*, Ṭanṭāwī Jawharī (1862–1940), seen as the father of Egyptian Spiritualism, played a role as al-Islambūlī’s mentor. Shedding light on the interaction between the two re-examines the preconceived notions surrounding the ideological positions taken by both – the class of religious scholars and the modern-educated *efendiya* – who in the narrative of the Egyptian renaissance (*nahḍa*) of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been painted on opposing sides. The relationship between Jawharī and al-Islambūlī illustrates the complexity of positions in Egyptian society, the interaction between classes through the medium of print, and how they came to understand the re-enchantment of the world through the different lenses their class upbringing situated them in. Through the reconstruction of both individuals’ biographies and intellectual production in printed periodicals and texts, I show how they carved a space to highlight the political affinity and connection between lands in the East, and continuities with Islamicate medieval traditions.

Keywords: Esotericism; Arabic Periodical Studies; Pan-Easternism; Intellectual History

The Efendi and the Shaykh: Spiritual Easternism in Fin-de-siècle Egypt

The intricacies of creation confounded a young schoolboy who arrived in the Egyptian capital, Cairo, from the countryside in 1877. This *fellaḥ* [peasant] would later be known as the father of Egyptian Spiritualism.¹ In this article, I turn to the intellectual contribution of Ṭaṇṭawī Jawharī,² a philosopher, exegete, and spiritualist, who played a remarkable role in instigating the Egyptian public's interest in naturalism, religious reform, and esotericism. I look at his influence on 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Islāmbūlī (1905–1964), the young periodical editor of the short-lived project *Al-Ma'rifa* (Knowledge or Gnosis, ca. 1931–1934). Al-Islāmbūlī was a self-enculturated *efendi* [modern-educated Egyptian],³ hailing from the countryside, who found himself embroiled in the discussions on esotericism, eastern solidarity, Perennialism, and theosophy taking place within Cairo. Jawharī, I argue, represented al-Islāmbūlī's take on *bāṭiniyyah* and Easternism, which he developed and circulated in his periodical. The concept of Eastern connectedness gained considerable popularity in the Interwar period

1. All references to Spiritualism are capitalized throughout, as it refers to the post-1848 movement that was spurred by the Fox sisters of Hydesville, New York who claimed to have communicated with spirits haunting their home. This phenomenon inspired scientists, scholars, and intellectuals to begin a scientific examination of whether communication with the spirits in the afterlife was possible. It was a movement that sought to make sense of religion and science. In addition, when discussing the Egyptian context in this article, capitalization of Spiritualism is maintained to signal these indigenous figures' participation in, and contribution to, this scientific and social movement of the long nineteenth century, rather than their being treated solely as expressions of a spiritual tradition in the Islamicate world. In the Islamicate world, individuals such as 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Islāmbūlī, Tantawī Jawhari, and many of their contemporaries writing in the journal *Al-Ma'rifa*, were in conversation with Spiritualists in Europe and their scholarly production is an attempt at them reconciling Western Spiritualism, Eastern spirituality, and Islamic mysticism with the many scientific innovations taking place at the turn of the century.

2. Some work has been done on Jawharī as an exegete and his scientific theology; see Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860–1950*, 314; Elshakry, "The Exegesis of Science in Twentieth-Century Arabic Interpretations of the Qur'an"; Daneshgar, *Ṭaṇṭawī Jawhari and the Qur'an*; 'Attiyya, "Al-Dars al-falsafī 'ind Ṭaṇṭawī Jawharī," <https://almuslimalmuaser.org/1998/11/11/الدرس-الفلسفي-عند-طنطاوي-جوهرى/أبحاث>; Jādū, *Al-Shaykh Ṭaṇṭawī Jawhari: Dirasa wa-nusus*.

3. Ryzova, *The Age of the Efendiyya*.

in Egypt; it set out to create a sense of connectedness and a defense against the penetrative and colonial force of the West.⁴

The examples of Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī demonstrate the diversity of positions in Egyptian society concerning socio-political belonging. Moreover, it highlights the way classes interacted with print media, and how they came to articulate the defense and necessity of Spiritualism through the different lenses of their class upbringing. By shedding light on the interaction between the two, I examine the complex intellectual formation of the two individuals and the varied influences that shaped their attitudes towards esotericism.⁵

The article begins with a discussion on esotericism, or *bātinīyyah* as Liana Saif proposes, which functions as an umbrella term for occultic, spiritual, and mystical discourses.⁶ I do so to contextualize Jawharī's and al-Islāmbūlī's interest in esoteric discussions of the time. I then dedicate sections to reconstructing their biographies and highlighting their unearthing of the spiritual heritage of the East as a project of anti-colonialism. Their contributions to the Western/Orientalist discourse show that the spirit and collectivity of the East is not to unearth a universal religion, rather it is to highlight the political affinity and connection between lands in the East.

Conceptual Framework: Egyptian Esotericism and Magical Mentality

I set out to understand Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī's bridging together of esotericism and Easternism, not as Wouter Hanegraaff's European model of diffusion, but

4. Jankowski, "The Eastern Idea and the Eastern Union in Interwar Egypt," 643. Such a concept depended on dividing the civilized world into two civilizational zones that are mutually exclusive and with their own unique operative principles. Early modernist Arab thinkers, prior to World War I, already divided the world into East (which included most of the Asian-African area) and West (which included Europe and America).

5. In doing so I follow the scholarly contributions of Thomas Bauer and Oliver Scharbrodt on the culture of ambiguity in Islam, forsaking a search for "intellectual coherence and biographical consistency" when studying the figures of the Egyptian renaissance [*nabḍā*] in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. See Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity*; Scharbrodt, *Muhammad Abdub*.

6. Saif, "What Is Islamic Esotericism?"

rather as a complex of “multilateral exchanges that are best grasped from a global perspective.”⁷ Recent works by Matthew Melvin-Koushki, Liana Saif, and Noah Gardiner, among others, have been changing the way we view the occultic, the magical, and the esoteric in Islam.⁸ In this more recent sense, esotericism began to function as a new, scholarly umbrella term that comprises diverse phenomena such as occultism, magic, witchcraft, and alchemy, among others. Within the field of Islamic Studies, the use of “esotericism/esoteric” as a helpful category has been largely dismissed. Though the scholarship on Sufism is abundant, I do not set out to equate esotericism with Sufism.⁹

Liana Saif proposes a new approach to the study of Islam and esotericism, one that acknowledges the skewed power relations inherent in centering the story of esotericism around the West. She finds that although scholars of Western esotericism have begun to reflexively address their field of study, some conduct a sort of global history of Western esotericism arguing that “the globalization of esotericism is evident in the nineteenth century, when ‘magic’ and ‘occult’ were reclaimed” as positive human endeavors that are superior to rationality, and could be seen to have offshoots all across the globe.¹⁰ However, Saif argues that when we turn to the plain of reality, bearing in mind the political, social, and economic conditions of “all across the globe” and the contexts within

7. Asprem and Strube, eds., *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*.

8. See Melvin-Koushki, “Introduction: De-Orienting the Study of Islamicate Occultism”; Sedgwick, “Is There Such a Thing as Islamic Esotericism?”; Liana Saif et. al., eds, *Islamicate Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice*; Gardiner, “Esotericist Reading Communities and the Early Circulation of the Sufi Occultist Aḥmad Al-Būnī’s Works”; also see Raphael Cormack’s recently published general history of performative esotericism. *Holy Men of the Electromagnetic Age*.

9. This reduction of “esoteric Islam” to Sufism, has largely resulted from René Guénon (1886–1951), the French Traditionalist and interlocutor of al-Islāmbūlī, coining of the term “*l’ésotérisme islamique*” with its Perennialist focus on Sufism. Guénon believed that there is a vast rift between the “primordial tradition of the Orient and the spiritually bereft Occident.” However, this understanding of Sufism was not without restrictions. Guénon and the Traditionalists were critical of popular Sufi practices—as many of the Islamic Reformists of the Islamicate world were—and instead tended to circulate their support for a more “sober” understanding of Sufism that is based on a textual imagination.

10. Saif, “What Is Islamic Esotericism?” 6.

which they exist, this turn to the esoteric was being weaponized as a means of othering those who were spiritual or occultic as pagan and superstitious. Hence, this global reclamation of the esoteric does not identify the uneven power relations of race, religion, and geographic location, namely, that if you did not subscribe to Protestant ideology and European rationality you were deemed a superstitious pagan. Thus, her approach proposes to assess Islamic esoteric currents according to “two epistemological paradigms, namely, intellectual or revelatory approaches to hidden phenomena,” and “social orientations perceived in personal and/or communal pieties.”¹¹

Saif traces two periods in which *bāṭiniyyah* was catalyzed. The first is between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, a period that witnessed a paradigm shift due to the development and institutionalization of Sufism, which challenged intellectual and philosophical investigations of hidden realities, instead touting revelation as the only true way. The second is the early to mid-twentieth century when the term *ésotérisme islamique* emerged in the Traditionalist milieu. I delve deeper into the second period she examines, firstly looking at whether we can tell varied narratives of how esotericism was catalyzed in sync with anti-colonial eastern solidarity movements as a global phenomenon.¹² Secondly, I sketch out how we can trace Egyptian esotericism through the Annales school’s history of mentalities, providing an insight into contributions to the study of esotericism from Arab scholars and intellectuals.

By the end of the twenties, a call for Eastern relatedness rose. Scholarship posits that this is due to the erasure of any delusions over Egypt’s democratic or “liberal” age.¹³ Many scholars marked the visits of Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) and Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), among others, as the initial

11. Saif, “What Is Islamic Esotericism?” 2.

12. On esotericism, religion, and global history see Strube, “(Anti-)Colonialism, Religion and Science in Bengal from the Perspective of Global Religious History”; Maltese and Strube, “Global Religious History.”

13. In the summer of 1930, the appointment of Ismā’īl Sidqī (1875–1950) as prime minister signaled the end of the so-called “liberal age,” as what followed was an erasure of the disenchantment that Egypt had any political freedom. King Fū’ad, in trying to limit the Wafd party and Muṣṭafa al-Naḥḥas’s growing popularity, relied on Sidqī as an ally. Khan, “Gandhi.”

stirrings of hope in a new form of alliance.¹⁴ This tendency was articulated in al-Islāmbūlī's debut editorial:

Of our most important motivations: firstly, binding Eastern countries together, and then secondly binding the East with the West: that is, by spreading/circulating the knowledge of the former to the latter. For the East remains mab'ath of wisdom and light, and the resting place of *nabi* and inspiration, a father of science and knowledge... We also seek to extract the benefits from Western science.¹⁵

The turn to being re-encharmed with the esoteric was an existential matter within a world-wide trend in the post-Great War moment. The disenchantment with materialism, democracy, and violence pushed individuals to re-think their position in the world, not only in Europe, but also in the Global South. I set out to do what Jason Ananda Josephson Storm has done in *The Myth of Disenchantment*,¹⁶ namely, looking for the history of enchantment. In challenging conventional notions of what particularly defined a reformer, an *efendi*, a journalist, or a Sufi, I suggest that individuals of all backgrounds interacted with esotericism in different forms. Hence, the discourse that Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī propagated in their writings was what Charles Hirschkind called "Historical Therapeutics," whereby "one recounts not who [they] are but why [they] are other than what [they] have been told."¹⁷ Considering Orientalist and colonial "othering" of Islamic cultures and its mobilization of their esoteric exoticization, while imputing "irrationality" to their practices and beliefs, the historical therapeutics of esoteric expressions of Easternism is mobilized by indigenous scholars to critically re-signify the contents of discourse, and articulate their identities and

14. This pan-eastern identity focused on a new alliance, alternative to the nationalist ones constructed by the Wafd and Constitutionalist Liberal party, who were, at the time, boycotting all elections, and nor were the Easternists supportive of the Egyptian monarchy's revival of the Islamic caliphate, which seemed bent on expanding the executive powers of Fū'ad as a religious caliph, and not concerned with British presence.

15. Al-Islāmbūlī, "Editorial," 4.

16. Josephson Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*.

17. Hirschkind, *The Feeling of History*, 6.

history within a turning point. Spiritual Easternism, as I interpret it through the discursive space of Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī, is a modern tradition *and* continuity from the past, of critical reflection on the state of politics, religion, European colonialism, and Orientalism. The task of Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī in the Egyptian press is a reorientation of cultural and political subjectivity, through the excavation of a buried past. I contextualize historical therapeutics as part of the various attempts by Egyptians to construct a holistic identity for them to situate themselves within global and local contexts. At the turn of the twentieth century, an existential crisis among intellectuals arose.¹⁸ They sought to carve out a space of belonging. Some chose to revive an inherent spirit of Pharaonic or Mediterranean-basin orientation.

Individuals such as Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal (1888–1956), the editor of *Al-Siyāsa al-Isbū'īyya* [The Weekly Politics] newspaper, had been a fervent adherent of the Pharaonism that arose in the 1920s.¹⁹ Haykal, among others, set out to construct the Egyptian identity according to a nostalgic embrace of the Pharaonic past as a means of self-determination, nationhood construction, and intellectual renewal.²⁰ His newspaper became the platform to present European values of modernity, the exoticization of the Pharaonic past, and assaults on the place of Islam in Egypt.

Another framework of identity formation was that of the Mediterranean spirit. One of the most important proponents of this Mediterranean identity imagination was Taha Husayn (1889–1973), the renowned Egyptian intellectual, who articulated the synthesis of this imagination in a later publication titled *Mustaqbal al-thaqafa fi-Miṣr* [The Future of Culture in Egypt], and put forward the vision of the Mediterranean as identity construction.²¹

18. Smith, *Islam and the Search for Social Order in Modern Egypt*, 2.

19. Smith, *Islam and the Search for Social Order in Modern Egypt*, 2. As a young man who had recently arrived in Cairo and become involved in the print culture of the time, al-Islāmbūlī initially worked as a journalist in the newspaper. However, he quickly became disaffected by the newspaper's Pharaonic ethos.

20. Al-Bayoumi, *al-Nabḍa al-Islamiyya fi siyar al-amiha al-mu'asiriyyin*, 194.

21. By the mid-1930s, however, Haykal and many of the old *Nahdawi*s began to shift their orientation toward a more Muslim-Arab framework of identity to incorporate Islam in Egyptian history; see Gershoni and Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs*, 90.

Al-Islāmbūlī found in the Eastern spirit a more interesting calling. *Al-Ma'rifa* was his redressing of the dismissal of Eastern intellectual production.²² Hence, he saw in it a readiness and potential to lead the counter-intellectual phase that Egypt and the Eastern world needed.²³ In the debut editorial, al-Islāmbūlī highlights the impetus behind the periodical as due to Maṣṣūr Fahmī, Muḥammad Farīd Wajdī, Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Rāziq, Muḥammad al-Taftāzānī, Shaykh al-'Urūba Aḥmad Zakī Pasha, and Ṭaṭṭāwī Jawharī.²⁴ In other entries, he thanks Madame Valentine de Saint-Point and Shaykh 'Abd al-Wahid Yaḥya (René Guénon's Muslim name). All mentioned were then recurrent contributors to the periodical (see figures below). This "council" of al-Islāmbūlī not only encouraged him to establish the periodical, but they also informed his approach to an alternative identity formation.

The portraits were added at the top of their articles in *Al-Ma'rifa*. Al-Islāmbūlī and his council of mentors sought to reform the "erroneous pitfalls Orientalists fall into ... when [overplaying] the West and its sciences."²⁵ This encompasses his general ethos of Easternism. But how was this ethos cultivated? Any attempt to answer such questions requires a turn to Ṭaṭṭāwī Jawharī.

The modern "disenchantment" with the world order after the Great War had repercussions in the Islamic context as well as the Western, leading to a trend of re-enchantment via esoteric discourse. I take this re-enchantment

22. Al-Islāmbūlī, "Editorial," 4. *Al-Ma'rifa's* ethos and establishment is the subject of my dissertation project and forthcoming article in *Oriente Moderno* titled, "The Multi-Modal *Taqriḥ*: Commendations in Cairo's *Al-Ma'rifa* Periodical."

23. *Al-Ma'rifa*, according to al-Islāmbūlī, was distinguished by the fact that it appeared before *Al-Risala* (1933-1953). Although *Al-Ma'rifa* went bankrupt in 1934 and *Al-Risala* continued until 1958, it is still worth noting the importance of the former, even with a short print run. Its brief and personal output allows us to carefully study with detail its development from the moment of its inception until its closure. The moment of *Al-Ma'rifa* is an articulation of a particular strain of intellectual thought, and in the pages of the periodical this ethos was reflected from start to finish thanks to its short print run, unlike other periodicals which have had time for editors to change and for their political and intellectual stances to evolve across decades.

24. Al-Islāmbūlī, "Editorial."

25. Al-Islāmbūlī, "Editorial," 4.



Figure 1, top left. Mansur Fahmi

Figure 2, top middle left, Madame de Saint-Point

Figure 3, top middle right, Muhammad al-Taftazani

Figure 4, top right, Muhammad Farid Wajdi



Figure 5, top left, Mustapha 'Abd al-Raziq

Figure 6, top middle left, Rene Guenon

Figure 7, top middle right, 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Tha'allabi

Figure 8, top right, Shaykh Tantawi Jawharī

as a “historically situated problem,” which allows us to create a conceptual tool to undertake a historiography of esotericism in the Arab world. I set out to complicate esotericism as a Western conception, where “the entire Islamic world has been treated as a ‘carrier civilization’ of mostly Greek (and hence, one assumes, ‘properly Western’) material that would only become Western

esotericism when discovered by Latin scholars in the fifteenth century.”²⁶ Looking at the history of re-enchantment in Egypt invites us to challenge the assumption that modernity and the enculturation of the *efendi* in colonial Egypt, led to a break with esoteric discourse.

The esoteric turn this article focuses on can be seen as an overlooked response to modernity. According to Josephson Storm, “modernization is often equated with the rise of instrumental reason, the gradual alienation of humanity from nature, and the production of a bureaucratic and technological life world stripped of mystery and wonder.”²⁷ For colonial Egypt, this modernization was entangled with the increased sculpting of a particular subjectivity by colonial rule, as well as calls for reform and modernization that battled traditional paths of life.²⁸ Identifying the usefulness of modern Spiritualism, and situating it within the intellectual milieu of Eastern heritage, allows scholars to respond to the Orientalist intellectual production and the sculpting of the Egyptian subject by both colonialists and/or “Oriental Orientalists.”²⁹

Spiritual Easternism, for Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī, “re-orient the Orient” within the discussions on the advent of modernity and constructions of belonging.³⁰ In my study of the concurrent development of discourse on Spiritualism and modernity, I show that being a modern subject is not equated with forsaking the spiritual in the realm of reality, but rather shows the culture of ambiguity that surrounded the budding of such discussions. Hence, I read Egyptian spiritualists’ entanglement of ancient religions and pre-modern texts, with the modern moment, as “consisting purely of residual ideas, concepts, and energies [which] possessed contemporaneous purpose and vitality,” in addition, rather

26. Aspren and Strube, *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, 3.

27. Josephson Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*, 4.

28. Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt*.

29. Ryad, “An Oriental Orientalist.”

30. I thank Liana Saif for suggesting this expression.

than viewing supernatural beliefs and magical practices as “residual remnants, [I] argue for their ongoing applicability as valuable cultural inheritances.”³¹

This article thus gives attention and agency to the “local minds and bodies in which [esoteric] ideas existed, or the intentions and agendas through which they were adopted, adapted, and eventually disseminated further.”³² Hence, I focus on what others have gradually erased from Jawharī’s repertoire. Jawharī’s more lauded exegetical works are irrevocably linked with his interests in modern Spiritualism, theosophy, and ancient Eastern mysteries.

These encounters with Western modernity, the reforms of the Arab *nabḍa*, and spiritual textual heritage have informed the development of the interests of Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī. This resulted in what I term a contemplative mentality, a borrowing from the French *Annales* school. It is through this concept that scholars such as Karl Bell and Richard Noakes were able to trace and study the development of how individuals thought and wrote about supernatural phenomena. In a similar manner, I work on the eclipsed study of the magical mentalities of Cairo’s urban dwelling classes, the migrant farmers-turned-scholars/*effendis*, and the rural inhabitants of the countryside.

In sketching out their contemplative mentality, I rely on the advocacy of Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch for the history of mentalities.³³ In this manner, I undertake

31. Bell, *The Magical Imagination*, 2. It is with this context that one can understand how Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, would, during his tenure as editor of the periodical *Al-Manār*, nevertheless issue a *fatwa* [religious legal opinion] finding it permissible to engage in séances to speak to the dead. It is also in this context that one can observe the secular proponents, represented in the periodical *Al-Muqtatāf*, who would also theorize about the potential input of the spiritual world for scientific progress. Therefore, this article focuses on mainstream figures in Cairene intellectual circles, not marginal and countercultural characters. Jawharī and Islāmbūlī circulated their insights on how to construct the world following the Great War, while navigating colonial realities, class mobility, and contemporary political reformulations of identity.

32. Aspren and Strube, *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, 4.

33. Febvre and Bloch argued for a mentalities approach that was often contrasted with the traditional methodologies of history that concentrate on great men and great texts. The school of mentalities picked up during the 80s and 90s, pushing for an approach to examine “collective traditions and structures of thought to draw from them the values and modes of perceptions of the groups who enshrined them.”

a history of Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī's sentiments, ideas, mental structures, as well as class structures. However, I do not assume the universality or eternalness of their mental habits and categories of thought, but rather I situate them within the socio-political culture they are embedded in.³⁴ They must be understood within the context of the language, myths, religious-social ties, and other structures that informed their world. Alfred Andrea traces the pioneering literature that relies on the history of mentalities approach, such as Jacques Le Goff, Georges Duby, and Carlo Ginzberg, showing how the mentalities approach “reveals the areas of common perception and sensibility shared by elites and nonelites alike.”³⁵

My attempt at bridging the mentalities approach with the study of esotericism is germinal within Islamic studies, but it follows a space Western secondary scholarship initially broached, such as in the works of Geoffery Ernest Richard Lloyd, Bell, and Noakes.³⁶ Lloyd focuses on problem areas that seem “most amenable to the hypothesis of mentalities” such as science, myth, magic.³⁷ He looks at the applicability of the mentalities approach when trying to understand the paradoxical beliefs of science and magic, and how the transition developed from the latter to the former. This transition is not focused on a revolutionary change in mental habits but rather a change in the self-definition of a style of inquiry. In Jawharī's case, I am not arguing that moving from the circles of Al-Azhar (perceived to be tradition) to Dār al-'Ulūm (perceived to be modernity) created a rupture in Jawharī's mentality; I am not interested in reproducing rigid boundaries and binaries. Rather, I am arguing that the epistemological spaces of al-Azhar and Dār al-'Ulūm provided a moment for Jawharī to change his style of inquiry; i.e., to observe and contemplate the scientific and natural world to understand the spiritual world and practice religion and socio-political advocacy.

In a more recent study, Bell shifts his interest to looking at the perceptions that

34. Andrea, “Mentalities in History,” 607.

35. Andrea, “Mentalities in History,” 607-8.

36. Noakes, *Physics and Psychics*.

37. Lloyd, *Demystifying Mentalities*, 7.

come hand in hand with the shifting mentalities of urban dwellers in Victorian England and the functions in which their beliefs were employed.³⁸ Bell’s work focuses on the “magical mentalities of the plebeian magical imagination.”³⁹ Bell turns to imagination “as a means of exploring and understanding the dynamics of modernization.”⁴⁰ Similarly, I look at the mentality of Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī as reflective of an appreciation of the antinomies of modernity and the desire for the esoteric. I utilize the expression “mentality,” rather than “ideology,” when explaining the conceptualization of their approaches because “it makes a useful distinction from ideology.”⁴¹ In such a case, mentalities, rather than ideologies, “have a less precise, fuzzier definition indicating more innate, and unarticulated mental processes. Such mental aspects are also less obviously shaped along lines or language of social and political divide such as ‘popular’ and ‘elite’.”⁴² Further possible divides that are worth noting are rational/logical and irrational/illogical; however, in this article, the *modus operandi* of Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī suggests the co-existence of a plurality of a rational and esoteric, a material and spiritual bend, which reiterates the “antinomial position in which people were capable of maintaining seemingly contradictory but concurrent modes of thought.”⁴³

Jawharī: Years in the Fields

To trace the movement of the young would-be *shaykh* from the countryside to the Egyptian capital I rely on narratives written by Jawharī himself that were interspersed in his writings, as well as the one comprehensive biography written by one of his disciples, ‘Abd al-‘Azz Jādū’s *Al-Shaykh Ṭantawī Jawharī: Dirasa wa-nuṣuṣ* (1980).⁴⁴ Such

38. Bell, *The Magical Imagination*, 2.

39. Bell, *The Magical Imagination*, 3.

40. Bell, *The Magical Imagination*, 5.

41. Bell, *The Magical Imagination*, 4.

42. Bell, *The Magical Imagination*, 4.

43. Bell, *The Magical Imagination*, 4–5.

44. Jādū, *Al-Shaykh Ṭantawī Jawharī: Dirasa wa-nuṣuṣ*. See also: Hartmann, “Schaich Ṭantāwī Dschauhari, Ein Moderner Egyptischer Theolog und Naturfreund” (1916); Jomier, “Le Cheikh

sources particularly highlight Jawharī's engagement with spiritualist discourses.

Jawharī attempted to resuscitate classical arguments about the soul, life, and death, while adopting empirical claims of his contemporaries. The concern with God's manifestations was at the center of his worldview. He writes in the opening lines of his *Al-Jawahir fi tafsir al-Qur'an* how he "was created in love with the wonders of the universe, enamored with its natural marvels, eager for the beauty in the sky, and for what is perfect on earth."⁴⁵ This sort of romanticism in the imagination is echoed in other instances when engaging with spiritualist discourse.⁴⁶

Similarly, I argue that Jawharī's "contemplative mentality" was informed by texts such as *Tabdhib al-akhlāq* by Ibn Miskawayh (d.1030), *Rasa'il Ikhwan al-Safa* [Epistles of the Brotherhood of Purity], *Kimya' al-sa'ada* [Alchemy of Happiness] by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d.1111), English translations of texts on Rāja Yoga, the *Vedas*, and the writings of Hermes Trismegistus, as well as contemporary texts such as John Lubbock's (1834-1913) *The Pleasures of Life* (1887).⁴⁷ It is unclear whether Jawharī had read the texts in the original English, or a translation.⁴⁸

Tantawi Jawhari (1862-1940) et son commentaire du Coran" (1958).

45. Jawharī, *Al-Jawahir fi tafsir al-Qur'an al-karim*, Vol. 1, 3.

46. For example, Bell in *The Magical Imagination* argues that the imagination, or mentality, of English individuals in Victorian England was informed by, and a response to, the intellectual, social, and geographic terrain in which they were located (9).

47. The texts were mentioned in various publications by Jawharī: his qur'anic exegesis, *Al-Arwah*, and *Kitab al-taj al-murassa'*. These texts were either interspersed in Jawharī's writings as sources of references or ones he directly mentions as influential in his worldview construction. He came across these texts either as recommendations from his teachers, or from his own perusing of periodicals. See Jawharī, *Kitab al-taj al-murassa'*, 28-29.

48. In his diaries, Muhammad Lutfi Jum'a writes that he had been Jawharī's student in the Khidiwiyya school, and he was close to Jawharī, enough that he helped his master learn the English language and gifted him English books to borrow for personal reading. See Muhammad Farid Wajdi, *Shahid 'ala al-'asr*. I would like to thank the second anonymous reviewer for alerting me to the fact that Jawharī translated Kant's *Über Pädagogik* based on its English version at the turn of the 20th century. In addition, Jawharī's exposure to Lubbock's thought was first through the latter's seminal text *The Pleasures of Life*. Lubbock had his texts widely translated in the Arab world, and his texts were printed and edited by the Arabic-language publishing houses in Cairo and Beirut. Lubbock had been translated by Wadi' al-Bustani (1888-1954). His texts, such as *Mahasin al-tabi'a wa-'aja'ib al-kawn* was published in 1913 by Matba'at al-Ma'arif in Cairo, which was

Unearthing these texts is important for better understanding Cairene book culture during the turn of the century. In his study on the influence of René Guénon, Mark Sedgwick notes that Guénon had a negligible influence on Egypt, finding that “this is so perhaps because in Egypt there was no real equivalent to Guénon’s audience in France.”⁴⁹ He finds that Egyptians had very little appetite for books other than the “modern and ancient titles about Islam,”⁵⁰ yet we find Jawharī among the initial Egyptians who had been interested in discussing such topics. Jawharī’s interests and writings expanded to unearthing different forms of sciences and intellectual production that were originally developed within the East. However, this article focuses particularly on his work on Spiritualism. In the case of Jawharī’s “religious bookshelf” it highlights the bookish tastes of the time, and in turn their intellectual and philosophical utilization. In addition, it provides a more nuanced understanding of how such texts on religion, Spiritualism, and the occult were produced, translated, and printed for an Egyptian audience through publishing houses and periodicals.

Born in the Delta region of lower Egypt in 1862, Jawharī grew up in the village of Kafr ‘Awadāllah Hijāzī. His maternal grandfather, Shaykh ‘Awadāllah Hijāzī was the head of the village. The young Jawharī grew up around his maternal grandparents’ family; with ties to Al-Azhar in Cairo.⁵¹ Young Jawharī’s interest in history was also sparked by living alongside the ancient Pharaonic ruins of Bubastis; the center of worship of the ancient Egyptian goddess Bastet.⁵² Unlike the *Nabdāwī*’s take on the Pharaonic heritage as constitutive of an Egyptian national identity, Jawharī saw the writings and philosophies of Ancient Egypt as part of the

owned by Najib Mitri—who sponsored the publications of al-Bustani’s particular translations of Lubbock. Lubbock, dubbed as “filasuf al-hayah al-yawmiyya” [The Philosopher of Daily Life], was circulated in many of the Cairene bookshops, among which are Maktabat Mujahid (owned and run by al-Islambuli’s close friend, Zaki Mujahid), and Maktabat al-Arab.

49. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 78.

50. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 78.

51. Jādū, *Al-Shaykh Ṭantawī Jawharī*, 10.

52. Jādū, *Al-Shaykh Ṭantawī Jawharī*, 11.

Eastern heritage of wisdom and spirituality. He dedicates a large part of his *tafsir* to detailing the contributions of ancient Egyptians, and the Perennial commonality in how they approached religious ceremonies and esoteric worldviews.⁵³

While his maternal family was composed of the religiously educated class and village heads, Jawharī's paternal side was part of the peasantry class of Kafr 'Awadāllah. Jawharī's father, a farmer, was proud of his son who excelled at the village's *kuttāb* [informal Qur'anic learning schools]; Jawharī remembers his father repeating, "I had not been lucky enough to be educated, and so I ensured that my son pursued it."⁵⁴ And so, in 1877, fifteen-year-old Jawharī arrived in Cairo to continue his traditional religious education.⁵⁵

Following six years of residence at Al-Azhar University, Jawharī falls ill and returns to the countryside to recuperate in 1883. His father also falls ill, and Jawharī finds his sick leave extended indefinitely to help his family with the farmland.⁵⁶ Whilst he worked the fields, watered the crops, and labored under the sun of the countryside, a shift began to occur in Jawharī's worldview. The countryside was a space suitable for the development of Jawharī's epistemological approaches as it was where he bridged together the aforementioned books he encountered in the Cairene context, and the observation of the natural world around him.

Within this epistemological space of observation and contemplation, Jawharī

53. The context within which Jawharī grew up is important. In his writings he stressed how observing his surroundings and soaking in everything with his senses informed the way he came to understand the universe and God. The religious temple's ruins are important to highlight, and the transcultural nature of the Bubastis area is also important. During his stay in the countryside, the ancient Egyptian ruins were excavated by the newly established Egypt Exploration Fund. This excavation was finished in 1887, a year after Jawharī had returned to Al-Azhar; it is then important to contextualize Jawharī's outlook on life as constituted during a moment of interaction between the village locals and the foreign delegation and archeologists. The excavation was headed by the Swiss archaeologist and Biblical scholar Édouard Naville (1844-1926), who published a report detailing the excavation process and results, along with some reproduction images of the community of Egyptians involved in the dig.

54. Jādū, *Al-Shaykh Ṭantawi Jawhari*, 12.

55. Jādū, *Al-Shaykh Ṭantawi Jawhari*, 13.

56. Jādū, *Al-Shaykh Ṭantawi Jawhari*, 13.

began to think about *mas'alit al-riḥ* [the question of the spirit].⁵⁷ At first, he says that his curiosity for the hidden world and esoteric in life was nonexistent, and that he swayed from absolute doubt [*shakke muṭlaq*] to denial [*inqār*], until he had an episode in the fields. He writes:

One day while working in our family's fields in Kafr 'Awadāllah, I began to feel dizzy because of my poor health, and so I rested on the ground and suddenly roused myself after having passed out. This [episode] spurred me to think of the matter of the soul and so I said "If I am still alive and I passed out and lost all sense and feeling, then what must it be like if I die and separate [my soul] from my body? Does my mind or knowledge remain?"⁵⁸

He began to reconsider questions of life and death, the intricacies of God's creations through what he observed of the sky, the earth, and his surroundings. 'Abd al-Azīz Jādū, an Egyptian intellectual and close follower of Jawharī, writes that while farming the land Jawharī acquired a tendency to seek out the presence of God and his wonders through what nature presented; he "looked to the trees, and the flowers, and the fields for all it did to heal him and his father from their illnesses."⁵⁹ Once he recuperated, Jawharī returned to the capital.

Jawharī found it difficult to readapt in Al-Azhar because of constraints with the way education functioned. In his book, *Nahdat al-umma wa-ḥayātuba* [The Renaissance of the Community and Its Life], regarding Dār al-'ulūm,⁶⁰ Jawharī writes:

One of the teachers of Dār al-'Ulūm visited Al-Azhar and met with a *shaykh* there where the latter laments "my son, who are these people who frown upon Al-Azhar's way of teaching! and why do they want to introduce subjects such as '*ilm al-tabi'a* [the natural sciences]?"

The son of Dār al-'Ulūm replies: "I find reforming the education system necessary. Did we not hear you, our *shaykhs*, lamenting and criticizing the way we rely on commentaries?" The *shaykh*: "we did, yes."

57. Jawharī, *Kitab al-arnab*, 215.

58. Jawharī, *Kitab al-arnab*, 215.

59. Jādū, *Al-Shaykh Ṭantawi Jawhari*, 13.

60. Dār al-'ulūm was established in the late nineteenth century to work in tandem with the traditional education in Al-Azhar; it functioned as representative of modern schooling.

The teacher says: “and still you teach through the commentaries, . . . as for the natural sciences, I truly believe that knowing these sciences is obligatory, for it is the spirit of belief and it is what the Qur’an requires of us.”⁶¹

This recounting of the conversation reflected Jawharī’s concerns over the state of education and how it constrained his contemplative mentality. We have here two institutions in conversation with one another. Not where one represents tradition and the other modernity; the two are extensions of one another according to Jawharī. He consciously reminds the reader that the Azhari alumni teach at Dār al-‘Ulūm, and the young professors of Dār al-‘Ulūm contribute to Al-Azhar’s scholarly life. It seems the particular focus on the natural sciences in Dār al-‘Ulūm sparked Jawharī’s curiosity. In 1889, three years after his return from the transformative period in the fields, Jawharī enrolls in Dār al-‘Ulūm. There he spends five years engrossed in expanding his studies.⁶²

In 1893, Jawharī graduates from Dār al-‘Ulūm and embarks on a career of teaching at his secondary school alma mater, and the Egyptian University (now Cairo University). During this teaching period, as well as his retirement in 1922, Jawharī was part of several political and intellectual societies [*jam‘iyyāt*].⁶³ Of particular importance here is the Islamic Brotherhood Society which was catering for diasporic students hailing from various Eastern countries who had come to study in Egypt. In many of his writings, Jawharī usually referred to some of his diasporic students from Southeast Asia, Muslim Russia, China, etc. For Jawharī, integrating the Eastern Muslim students into Cairene society through knowledge production, education, and literary gatherings was at the forefront of his message.⁶⁴ His extracurricular activities also included being an essential

61. Jawharī, *Nabdit al-umma wa-hayatuba*, 70.

62. Jādū, *Al-Shaykh Ṭaṭṭāwī Jawharī*, 88.

63. These included: such as Jam‘iyyat al-mu’assa al-Islamiyya (established in 1910), al-Jam‘iyya al-Jawharīyya (established in 1914), Jama‘at al-Ikhwa al-Islamiyya (established in 192?), Jam‘iyyat al-Shuban al-Muslimin (established in 1927), and the Spiritualist society Da’irat al-Qahira al-Rawhiyya (1937). See Jādū, *Al-Shaykh Ṭaṭṭāwī Jawharī*, 14–36.

64. “Ta’lim al-Sharq al-Islami,” 5.

member to *Da'irat al-Qabira al-Rūḥiyya* (Cairo's Spiritualist Club);⁶⁵ a society established by Aḥmad Fahmī Abū al-Khayr (d. 1960).⁶⁶ Abū al-Khayr points out the pioneering role Jawharī played in helping him establish Egypt's first Spiritualist society, finding him a staple presence in every seance and meeting.⁶⁷ Jawharī's involvement with modern Spiritualism was through attendance of seances and the establishment of societies catering to this in Cairo, as well as writerly pursuits with his authoring of *Al-arrwāḥ* [The Spirits], *Ayn al-insān* [Where is Man?], and *Barā'at al-Abāssa* [The Innocence of Abassa].⁶⁸

Furthermore, his interest in interacting with like-minded individuals also extended to interacting with foreign delegates in Cairo. Jawharī had spent nine years in close companionship with Olga Lebedeva (1852–193?)⁶⁹—who arrived in Egypt in 1906—teaching the Russian Orientalist Arabic and reading *Al-Risala al-Qushayriyya* for her to translate it.⁷⁰ Of interest is that Lebedeva was said to be responsible for opening the Egyptian chapter of the Theosophical Society in Cairo.⁷¹ Jawharī writes that Lebedeva was commissioned by a German scholar

65. According to Majid Daneshgar, Jawharī was inspired by the London Ghost Club in co-establishing Cairo's Spiritualist Circle. See Daneshgar, "Tantawi Jawhari," 161.

66. Ahmed Fahmi Abu al-Khayr was a pioneer of Spiritualism in Egypt. He was a teacher of natural sciences at Egypt's governmental schools. After having lost his son, he began to seek out spiritual mediums to reach out to his boy beyond the realm of his reality. He relied on print enterprises to vocalize his interest in Spiritualism and the benefits of spiritual healing through mediums and seances, by publishing the periodical *'Alam al-ruh* [The Spirit World], and by translating works by Western Spiritualists J. Arthur Findlay's *On the Edge of the Etheric* (1931); 'Ala hafat al-'alam al-Ithiri (1938). See Radi, *'Asharat asdiqa'* [Ten Friends], 3–7.

67. Abu al-Khayr, "Al-Shaykh Ṭaṭawī Jawharī," 10.

68. The story behind the inception of this book is part of a forthcoming article titled, "The Innocence of al-'Abassa: Historical Therapeutics and Justice in the Spirit World." Jawharī had been attending a seance when Harun al-Rachid reached out to him via a Spiritualist medium asking him to correct a historical mistake the print scholar and author Jurji Zaydan had committed against Harun's sister al-'Abbasa in one of his Islamic History Novels Series.

69. Olcay, "Olga Lebedeva (Madame Gülnar)," 40–71.

70. Jawharī, *Tafsir al-Jawahir*, 235; Jawharī, *Ayn al-insan*, 65.

71. Almost no scholarly work has been done to study the presence of the Theosophical Society in Egypt, the bulk of scholarship focuses on Asian contexts. However, the Theosophical Society was functioning in Egypt, where a chapter in Cairo was established by Russian Orientalist

named Max—he does not supply a surname—and was sponsored by the Egyptian government throughout her stay to translate al-Qushayri's work.⁷² According to the Lebanese poet May Ziadeh, Lebedeva was responsible for establishing the Egyptian Charter for the Theosophical Society. It is likely that Jawharī's extended companionship with Lebedeva initially introduced him to the debates on modern Spiritualism, coupled with the increased publication on the topic in Arabic periodicals—hailed in Arabic scholarship as *'Asr al-bahth al-ilmi li-l-ruh* [The age of scientific search for the spirit].⁷³

The contemplative mentality of Jawharī, to write the esoteric world, is a mode of cognitive or epistemological interpretation manifested through specific cultural practices, namely, Eastern ones.⁷⁴ Jawharī's fervent interest in the renaissance of the Eastern community was apparent in his writings. The renaissance would require a melding together of materialism and Spiritualism, where he writes:

Olga Sergeevna Lebedeva (1854-193?) around 1913. May Ziadeh, the Lebanese-Palestinian poet and essayist, wrote of the many literary salons that Lebedeva frequented in order to establish a dialogue between East and West, showing how the Theosophical Society was present in Egyptian intellectual society and circles. As the head of the Egyptian chapter of the Theosophical Society, Lebedeva made sure to engage with the Egyptian intellectuals of the time whereby she organized a recurrent literary salon for a mixed audience. Ziadeh lists the attendees that were present, such as 'Abd al-Khaliq Tharwat Pasha, Ahmad Zaki Pasha, Lutfi al-Sayyid, Ali Bahgat, Serge Vornoff, Dr. Comanos Pasha, Shibili Shamil, and Ziadeh herself. This Western-Eastern dialogue, sponsored by Lebedeva and the Theosophical Society, according to Ziadeh continued after the Great War, and during the 1930s more Western Orientalists and Theosophists attended these recurrent meetings in Groppi, the famous coffee shop in downtown Cairo. Among them was Madame de Saint-Point and Paul Vanderborcht (1899-1971). De Saint-Point and her Theosophist associates established smaller Theosophist-inclined societies such as Nadi al-bi'a al-fikriyya and Jam'iyyat al-fanus al-'asam. See Ziadeh, *Kitabat mansiyya*, 96-100.

72. The Max scholar is an enigma in Jawharī's writing, he either referred to him as Max or Marx. It is worth speculating whether this Max is German philologist and orientalist Max Müller, who directed the publication of a 50-volume set of English translations titled the Sacred Books of the East. The translation project published some of the most seminal religious texts, according to German religious studies, spanning from Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, and Islam. To what extent can it be plausible to put forth that Qushayri could have been part of the religious bookshelf of the Sacred Books of the East?

73. Ra'uf Abayd, *Al-Insan ruh la-jasad*, 15.

74. Bell, *The Magical Imagination*, 4-5.

You see inspiration and development in materialist communities, such as the people of Europe, comes because of their preoccupation with materialism, whereas communities that have only circumscribed themselves to spiritual pursuits excel in only one thing. As for the Muslim *'umma* it draws its inspiration from the material and the spiritual, they do not only stop at materialism . . . and they do not only stop at Spiritualism . . . rather they draw their inspiration to develop from both tendencies, benefiting then their spirit, body, meaning of life, and material conditions.⁷⁵

Jawharī's attempt at embracing materialism and Spiritualism sought to understand the esoteric entanglements of the *umma* and encouraged it to seek its renaissance through both aspects. Jawharī's bridging attempts should be contextualized within the discourses taking place during this period. In her chapter on materialism, Marwa Elshakry highlights how materialism had been used by individuals such as Shumayyil to argue against "faith in Spiritualism or supernaturalism of any kind."⁷⁶ Jawharī's conceptual framework present in his writings sought to "demonstrate in exhaustive detail that science was in full harmony with scripture."⁷⁷ I do not set out to set up Jawharī as a remarkable figure of his time, his ideas of reconciling Spiritualism and materialism, as well as science and religion, were a matter of concern for many Egyptians at the turn of the century.⁷⁸ The German Arabist Martin Hartmann (1851-1918) after having read Jawharī's works found that the latter "contends that explanations about living beings, and even the way plants and minerals build chains that ascend from a lower to a higher order, were expressed by Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406), Ibn Miskawayh (d. 1030) , al-Rāzī (d. 1209), and others; therefore, Darwin's theory of evolution would not be anything new."⁷⁹

This is part and parcel of al-Islāmbūlī's ethos as well. Embracing the duality of modernity/heritage, spirituality/materiality, Orientalist/indigenous discourses are part of the dual nature of *Al-Ma'rifa*'s position in Egyptian society in the 1930s,

75. Jawharī, *Tafsir al-Jawahir*, 13-14.

76. Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic*, 100.

77. Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic*, 180.

78. Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic*, 314.

79. Hartmann in Daneshgar, *Taṭṭawwī Jawharī and the Qur'an*, 33.

Al-Islāmbūlī finds that engaging with modern Spiritualism and Theosophy as important for embedding oneself in a cross-cultural discussion, in order to bridge the gap between East and West. He argues that seeking the Perfect Man and spiritual heights, as the Theosophists and Western spiritualists are doing, is essential – but what is more important for him is to trace the origins of the discussion, arguing that it was based on Indian philosophy and Sufi thought. This creates the amalgamation of Eastern Spiritualism, one that found the road to self-actualization of Perfect Man is one that “strips away worldly desires, denies the human Self, and gets rid of the corporeal. Perfection is in stages, where each stage requires specifics to reach.”⁸⁰

Their discussions on the binary of material and spiritual are grounded in the discourses of modern spiritualists—as well as indigenous Arab scholarship of the time. The Arabic press witnessed an increased interest in the dichotomy between materialism and Spiritualism. Rene Guénon, for example, criticizes the West’s decadence at the turn of the twentieth century, where in his book *East and West* he writes that:

But most extraordinary of all is perhaps the claim to set up this abnormal civilization [the West] as the very type of all civilization, to regard it as “the civilization” par excellence, and even as the only one that deserves the name. Extraordinary too, and also complementary to this illusion is the belief in “progress,” considered no less absolutely, and naturally identified, at heart, with this material development that absorbs the entire activity of the modern West.⁸¹

For Guénon, and many of the Egyptians who lauded his critical view of the West as decadent, such as ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmud (1910–1978), the West’s material development is not to be praised, rather it is the very essence of their corruption. Guénon finds that the modern world, which has been acted on too much by the West, “has reversed the natural relations between the different orders of things: once again, it is depreciation of the intellectual order (and even absence of intellectuality), and exaggeration of the material and the sentimental orders, which all go together to make the Western civilization of today an anomaly, not to say a monstrosity.”⁸²

80. Al-Islambulī, “Al-Itijāhāt al-hadītha,” 537.

81. Guénon, *East and West*, 4.

82. Guénon, *East and West*, 24.

He finds, “the only impression that, for example, mechanical inventions make on most Easterners is one of deep repulsion; certainly it all seems to them far more harmful than beneficial, and if they find themselves obliged to accept certain things which the present epoch has made necessary, they do so in the hope of future riddance; these things do not interest them, and they will never really interest them.”⁸³ (This line of thinking, where the passive and ancient East is disinterested or apprehensive of “technology” is not echoed in Jawharī’s writings. For Jawharī there resides a nuanced understanding in this debate, where materialism and technological advancement are complemented by an inward appreciation of the soul and the divine creations. Additionally, this materialism is not inherently a result of the social and cultural make-up of Western society, but as a result of years of contact with the East—the origin of both materialism and Spiritualism, according to Jawharī.

This line of thinking was also present in other Arabophone scholarship. ‘Abd al-Mun’im Khalaf, for example, writes: “One of the weapons that we should highlight that we are in possession of, is that we embrace the Materialist *madhab*, which both the Eastern and Western cultures are enamored with” — notice how he does not make a distinction — “as this [materialism] is the backbone of our religion, and the master of our minds/thinking, and the door through which we pass to know God, and our religious guide that the Quran places before us in our search for God and his secrets and his traits, and in our search for our relationship with Him, and with the materialist universe.”⁸⁴ Badrī Ṭaha ‘Alam, in one of his contributions to *Al-Ma’rifā*, complicates this spiritual versus material divide even further, arguing that the self [*nafs*] is actually characterized by two natures that are in constant battle between one another; a materialistic self and a spiritual self, where one can be both, or one or the other, to different degrees at various moments in life.⁸⁵

83. Guénon, *East and West*, 10.

84. Abd al-Mun’im Khallaf, “Al-Madiyya al-Islamiyya,” 6.

85. Badri Taha Alam, “Al-Nafs al-māddiyya wa-l-nafs al-rūḥiyya,” 689.

Muḥammad Farīd Wajdī, another equally important figure in the history of Egyptian Spiritualism,⁸⁶ also contributed quite frequently in *Al-Ma'rifa* on the topic. In his article on the “Animism *madhab*,” he takes a stance against those who acknowledge a more spiritual approach to understanding and receiving knowledge, namely the proponents of Guenon’s Perennialism, but have trouble accepting the presence of spirits and communicating with them. He challenges those who do not quite understand the distinctions between materialism and Spiritualism, and argues that the former, through technology and natural sciences, has been used to prove the presence of the spiritual in daily life; through science and technology one is able to sense and communicate with the spiritual world.⁸⁷

The historical therapeutics of Eastern spirituality are anti-colonial in nature, whilst also being a process of re-reading the Eastern heritage in conversation with the Islamic and the Western. By introducing the discussions on the binaries of materialism and Spiritualism from the Arabophone scholars, I shed light on the attempts of Arab scholars to engage in the ongoing discussions of Western esotericists taking place both in the West and the Arab world. For al-Islāmbūlī, embracing the materialist and spiritualist allows the Easterner to find a brother in the Westerner—where a universal brotherhood is thus formed as a means of reforming the present. Al-Islāmbūlī constructed the building blocks of his universal brotherhood with like-minded individuals engaged in transcultural exchange such as Jawharī and others.

Al-Islāmbūlī: The Efendi’s Periodical

Al-Islāmbūlī wore varied metaphorical hats when engaging with the Cairene and Pan-Eastern intellectual discussions of the interwar period. He met Jawharī through a common friend, the lawyer and intellectual Muḥammad Luṭfī Jum‘a (1886–1953)—a former student of Jawharī.⁸⁸ This relationship then developed into a mentor-student

86. I deal with Jawharī and Muhammad Farid Wajdi more thoroughly in my current dissertation project.

87. Muhammad Farid Wagdi, “Al-Mabāḥith al-nafsiyya wa-l-falsafa al-māddiyya” 57–58.

88. The contribution of Jum‘a to Egyptian intellectual life has been covered by Mattias Gori

one, where Jawharī encouraged al-Islāmbūlī to establish a periodical to work on his intellectual project of reviving *rūḥ al-sharq* [the spirit of the East].⁸⁹

It seems probable that the rural-inhabitants-turned-urban-dwellers bonded over similar life trajectories, seeing as they both came from the Egyptian countryside. However, young al-Islāmbūlī was born in the village of Basyūn in the north of Egypt to a mercantile class family. He was educated at the village's *kuttāb*, until he moved to Cairo in 1919 with his father to enroll in a formal government secondary school. This episode was short-lived with the eruption of the 1919 revolution.⁹⁰ When the family deemed it safe enough, al-Islāmbūlī returned to Cairo and was enrolled in the 'Abdīn night school to finalize his secondary education. However, his father's untimely death further halted al-Islāmbūlī's educational track.⁹¹

Although he was forced to take on the breadwinning position for the family, al-Islāmbūlī still remained a fervent bibliophile. From al-Islāmbūlī's early development, we see what Lucie Ryzova terms "the narratives of 'becoming efendi' or efendification" of our young periodical editor.⁹² While Ryzova looks into the "social practice of efendification, the process of making one's son an *efendi* through modern schooling,"⁹³ I show how al-Islāmbūlī's connections, private reading (*mutāla'a*),⁹⁴ and his foray into the world of print journalism resulted in his becoming part of the *efendiya* class, and how it connects to his engagement with

Olesen in his PhD dissertation. See Olesen, "The Future is Eastern."

89. Al-Islāmbūlī, "Editorial," 4.

90. The nationwide revolt and civil disobedience from November 1918 to July 1919 against the British colonial occupation of Egypt, which resulted in Egypt earning its independence in 1922 and the establishment of its constitution in 1923. See Heshmat, *Egypt 1919*; Hellyer and Springborg, eds, *The Egyptian Revolution of 1919*. Al-Islāmbūlī joined the demonstrations and aided in circulating anti-British pamphlets which later led to his arrest by the colonial authorities. The short-lived political arrest resulted in his suspension from the governmental school, and in his return to the village, for his family feared if he remained in Cairo he would be under the scrutiny of the authorities.

91. Al-Bayumi, *al-Nabḍa al-Islamiyya fi-siyar al-lamīha al-mu'asiriyyin*, 194.

92. Ryzova, *The Age of the Efendiyya*, 89–90.

93. Ryzova, *The Age of the Efendiyya*, 89.

94. On private reading and its manifestations in premodern and modern settings see Yousef, *Composing Egypt*.

Spiritualism. This growing class of *efendiya* (sing. *efendi*) were “the first self-consciously modern generation in Egyptian history,”⁹⁵ where their consciousness and ways of belonging are constructed by their engagement with public life through new print technology and the resultant journalistic scene. The periodicals and journals of the time functioned as “venues” that allowed for the “articulation of efendiyya subjectivity,” and as a site of performance through which “a national community of similarly minded men [and women] with a shared perspective on society and history, and their own roles in it” was practiced.⁹⁶

He was known for expanding his connections with various members of the Egyptian and international literati circles, and even to the point of obscure mystics and European perennialists and Traditionalists. Jum‘a writes of an evening where he was invited by al-Islāmbūlī to the latter’s house. There he found “[The exiled Tunisian national leader] ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Tha‘āllabī, Madame [Valentine] de Saint-Point,⁹⁷ and an Arabic-speaking, yet silent French man [René Guénon],⁹⁸ who had become popular

95. Ryzova, *The Age of the Efendiyya*, 4.

96. Ryzova, *The Age of the Efendiyya*, 21.

97. For more on de Saint-Point, see Contarini “Valentine de Saint-Point: A Futurist Woman?”; Sedgwick, *Against The Modern World*, 98-103.

98. For a full biographical study of Guénon see Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*. Mark Sedgwick demarcates his life into three phases that all built onto one another to encompass his Traditionalist thinking; he was initially interested in the occult scene in Paris, where he joined the Martinist group in 1906. The second phase marks the beginning of his disaffection with Western modernity and his turn to Traditionalism. This was later followed by the third and final phase of his life; i.e., his conversion to Islam and turn to Sufism as he resided in Cairo until his death. Guénon’s initiation into Sufism and introduction to Islam were administered by the Sufi Ivan Aguéli (1869-1917), a Swede who alternated between France and Egypt. Aguéli, who was part of the Theosophical Society, was embroiled in anti-colonial politics in Egypt after his conversion; a sentiment that we see echoed in Guénon and de Saint-Point, who were anti-colonial and anti-western in their writing in Egypt, particularly through the latter’s periodical *Le Phoenix*, which she used as a platform to criticize British colonial presence. In 1929, Guénon met Dina Shilito, a wealthy American who was heavily interested in the occult, and had recently converted to Islam; they initially developed a project together of working on a series of Traditionalist books, involving collecting books for Guénon to edit. Shilito suggested they embark on a journey to the East; they set sail for Egypt in 1930, but their partnership was curiously broken up after a few months, and Guénon remained in Egypt. Both de Saint-Point and Guénon had an invested interest in ancient Eastern mysteries, Perennialism, and Spiritualism.

in his own country, but then he Orientalized [*istashbraq*] and remained in Egypt, and ended up marrying an Egyptian Muslim woman.”⁹⁹ Jum‘a paints for us the types of individuals in al-Islāmbūlī’s close circle; narrating a night they spent discussing Sufism and the corpus of Ibn al-‘Arabī (138). This motley group of guests is not a rare occurrence for al-Islāmbūlī. He was known among his contemporaries for finding merit in “anyone who defends his own ‘*aqīda* [belief] with honesty,” even if it went against what he believed in (138). Jum‘a finds al-Islāmbūlī to be a fervent admirer of atheists – this is perhaps Jum‘a’s inability to stomach Perennialism (138–39). In this manner, I read al-Islāmbūlī’s various stances as pluralistic efforts to “reconcile conflicting worldviews without vindicating one at the expense of the other.”¹⁰⁰

Al-Islāmbūlī’s council also included Western constituencies, namely, the traditionalist René Guénon and Valentine de Saint-Point. De Saint-Point was a French artist, performer and novelist who converted to Islam in 1918 during her time in Morocco, and took on the name of Rūḥiyya Nūr al-Dīn.¹⁰¹ Once a “reformed” feminist and nudist model, de Saint-Point exhibited a more subdued and conservative feminist inclination and a pro-Eastern tendency, which led al-Islāmbūlī to have her contribute routinely to *Al-Ma‘rifā*. In the debut issue of *Al-Ma‘rifā*, al-Islāmbūlī adds an addendum to de Saint-Point’s article as a biographical note. He introduces her as the editor of the periodical *Le Phoenix*, a French periodical published in Egypt – explaining that he solicited her to write an article “of her opinion on the Eastern woman . . . seeing as she is one of the people who have comprehensively studied Eastern life.”¹⁰² It is probable that she had been the point of contact between René Guénon and al-Islāmbūlī; for she had been among the European residents in Egypt who welcomed Guénon and stood by his side when he first arrived in Cairo in 1930.

99. Jum‘a, *Shahīd ‘ala al-‘asr: Mudbakirat*, 138. Jum‘a is unimpressed with Guénon, seeing him as a look-alike to “Monsieur Massignon,” but is not close to the latter’s intellectual standing.

100. Oliver Scharbodt, *Mubammad ‘Abdūh*, 9.

101. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 66–78, 129–30.

102. De Saint-Point, “Huriyyat al-Mar‘a fi al-Islam” (trans. al-Islāmbūlīāmbūlī), 89.

Guénon is an important contributor to al-Islāmbūlī's intellectual ethos. I do not aim to overstress Guénon's effect, nor suggest that he is the sole contributing factor to al-Islāmbūlī's interest in Sufism, Perennialism, and Eastern philosophy. Instead, I provide a more nuanced approach to situate Guénon as one among many other influences on al-Islāmbūlī. Guénon was named as one of the mentors who inspired al-Islāmbūlī to establish *Al-Ma'rifa*.¹⁰³ Guénon contributed to *Al-Ma'rifa* during its first year; however, his articles lessened over time, perhaps in response to al-Islāmbūlī's interest in modern Spiritualism—which Guénon, publishing under his Muslim name 'Abd al-Wahid Yahyā, wrote a series of scathing articles against, titled “Modern Spiritualism and its Errors [*Al-Rūḥiyya al-ḥadītha wa-kbatā'uha*],” and “Modern Spiritualism: A Response to a Response [*Al-Rūḥiyya al-ḥadītha: Rad 'ala rad*].” In these articles, Guénon challenges the proponents of modern Spiritualism, arguing that although modern Spiritualism was developed by individuals who sought to combat the twentieth century's overt materialism, it somehow becomes materialism of another nature. “It is even more damaging than materialism as it created false imaginations and myths in order to influence those who do not embrace the common materialist opinions of the time,” argues Guénon.¹⁰⁴ While al-Islāmbūlī found in Guénon a mentor, their interests still diverged when it came to the topic of modern Spiritualism – instead, al-Islāmbūlī's ideas were more in line with Ṭaṇṭawī Jawharī's orientation.

The Efendi and the Shaykh: Historical Therapeutics of Spiritual Easternism

In an article titled “Modern Approaches to the Philosophy of Spiritualism,” al-Islāmbūlī laments:

Of the strangest manifestations of this age are European and American scholars' dedication to studying Spiritualism in all its forms. We find that this manifestation

103. Al-Bayoumi, *Al-Nabḍa al-Islamiyya fi siyar a'lamihā al-mu'asiriyin*, 139.

104. 'Abd al-Wahid Yahya, “Al-Ruḥiyya al-ḥadītha,” 355. For a more thorough examination of these articles see Elashmawy, “Taming the Animal Within in Cairo,” 45; forthcoming.

is an indication of the types of crises the world has suffered, be it psychological or economic – one that has forced this new direction of inquiry.

This . . . makes us extremely proud, for in addressing Spiritualism and philosophy, they will be heading towards the East – the emitter of wisdom and light. The East is where spirituality has always resided. . . . Although we are truly glad of this moment in history, we are nevertheless pained. We [as Easterners] have neglected to engage with this, seeing as we are the origins of where this discussion had first begun.¹⁰⁵

Al-Islāmbūlī's observation indicates his favorable take on Spiritualism, indicating three things. First, that the preoccupation of Spiritualism is a political mediator between the West and East. Second, that the initial textual and intellectual conceptualization of Spiritualism occurred in the East. And third, that he observes a lack of initiative from Islamicate scholars and intellectuals in addressing Spiritualism in the same scientific manner. Rather than being an object of study, al-Islāmbūlī wishes scholars to engage with Western spiritualists and intellectuals, to be part of a “brotherly and equal dialogue” between East and West (539).

In his article in *Al-Ma'rifa* titled, “From the East to the West,” Jawharī writes,

humans are one type . . . They multiplied in number and spread into the earth, East and West. The East is the father, the West its son, and the father is compassionate towards his son. As for religions, they are all Eastern in origins, be it Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. From the West crawled the Greeks, the Ptolemies, and the Romans toward the East, forcing themselves . . . in the lower East as conquerors. Here the father turns to his son and says to him, “My dear boy, if you throw stones at me, I shall throw dates at you. Do not exit your father's realm until I have put you upon the right path.”¹⁰⁶

For Islāmbūlī, this represented an entry point into Orientalist discourse of the time regarding various topics, and not only Spiritualism and eternal knowledge. This was an opportunity to critically re-signify the contents of the Orientalist discourse and articulate identity and history. He writes that he is interested “in extrapolating what is rotten or wrong within the ranks of Theosophy and

105. Al-Islāmbūlī, “Al-Itijāhāt al-haditha,” 537.

106. Jawharī, “Min al-sharq li-l-gharb,” 453.

modern Spiritualism when it comes to how they came to write about the East and its heritage.”¹⁰⁷ He finds merit in discussing the trends that occupy the esoteric imagination of Westerners, but on Easterners’ own terms.

Jawharī writes of this first presence of the *Gharbyin* [Westerners] in the East during the age of antiquity. This was marked by warring by the Greeks and Romans against the reigning Eastern empire of the time: the Persians. “The end of this interaction was marked by the conversion of the polytheist Westerners to Christianity. Christianity spread into the West and the Eastern light of Christianity that had shone brightly began to dim as Charlemagne massacred the Saxons in 782 and continued to burn and pillage towns that he found to be heretical.”¹⁰⁸ Jawharī finds that the Eastern light was finally extinguished in this pre-modern era particularly with the establishment of the Inquisition trials of 1182.¹⁰⁹

Once again, the light of wisdom, progress, and Islam brought the Westerners to the East once more with the Crusades, argues Jawharī. During this time, the Westerners in the East began to be exposed to the treasure trove of texts that the Abbasids had translated and maintained. Jawharī then turns to his contemporary moment and says, “here they are, come again to the East for the third time; with no excuse except to take away the rights of Easterners and humiliate them ... they accepted our Christianity fourteen centuries ago, in the first half they failed in following its teachings and were slaves [to their decadent desires]. In the second half, our light shone upon them and so they moved forward; with us being the parents and them, the children; with our sciences and religions they have developed. And so, is the father’s lot in life only betrayal from his son? And an ignorant legacy? And greed, tyranny, and colonization? You have angered humanity, you Westerners.”¹¹⁰

107. Al-Islambulī, “Editorial,” 1-3.

108. Jawharī, “Min al-sharq li-l-gharb,” 454.

109. Jawharī, “Min al-sharq li-l-gharb,” 454.

110. Jawharī, “Min al-sharq li-l-gharb,” 455.

He ends the article with a cautionary message to Western countries. He writes: “Beware, you Westerners . . . The time of reckoning has come, the East has awoken. It is like a plant that had been buried under a debris of snow, and the sun had spread its rays upon it and melted it; and so, the plant begins to grow. Beware of the anger of the Easterners. Japan, China, India, Turkey, Persia, the Arab lands, and Afghans alongside Russia; all are prepared. Can you not comprehend this?”¹¹¹

This idea of the East as the emitter of light and a carrier of inherent spirituality and wisdom is part of Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī’s discursive therapeutics. In the first volume of his exegesis, Jawharī writes about the recurrent theme of “*ex, Oriente lux*,”¹¹² saying:

It was once said that the sun rises on the people of the East, travelling to the people of the West, moving forth across the Atlantic to the Americas, crossing round to the lands of the East once more—this is how we view science, wisdom, and civilization, moving within the same pathway as the sun, seeking the utmost of its capabilities to shine upon the Eastern people. The king of India was called the King of Wisdom, the Chinese King: the king of the people, the Turkish King: the king of lions, and the Persian King: the king of kings.¹¹³

In the next issue, al-Islāmbūlī builds upon his contemplative mentality. He argues that without religion, knowledge cannot be reached. The idea of religion as science, al-Islāmbūlī says, can be traced in all the ancient religions such as Taoism in China, as well as other manifestations such as in Persian and Hindu religious texts (*Vedas* and *Avesta*). For this religious science to be planted in the soul, it had to take physical shape in art and literature. This is done for man to externalize what is within his spirit. The “*ex, Oriente lux*” for al-Islāmbūlī, as for Jawharī, is

111. Jawharī, “Min al-sharq li-l-gharb,” 456.

112. This conceptualization, given impetus by scholars such as Sir Edwin Arnold in his *Light of Asia* appeared in 1879, led to an extensive and serious academic endeavor to study the religions of the East, and to publish texts and translations. To what extent did Islāmbūlī and his contributors find currency in this idea and how did it serve their cultural/intellectual project? See Arnold, *The Light of Asia*. In the case of Japan in particular, Cemil Aydin argues that the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 was a global moment where Eastern countries began to reflect on their own positions within the Imperial world order. See Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia*, 71–72.

113. Jawharī, *Tafsir al-jawahir*, 143.

essential and a matter he comments upon time and again in his writing. In turn, al-Islāmbūlī is also interested in engaging in a historical therapeutics—one that unearths the Islamic heritage and finds commonality with the Hindu, Persian, Chinese, etc., discursive spaces. Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī found in Eastern cultures and religions an affinity for each other; one that is imbued with an ancient Eastern soul. This preoccupation with the esoteric is at the crux of *Al-Maʿrifā*'s ethos. And once the Western spiritualist scholars, through their studies of Spiritualism, arrive at the truth that this Eastern soul is the carrier of such knowledge, “the flag of peace will be hoisted, and love, fraternity, and equality will be achieved.”¹¹⁴

Conclusion

In this article, I have provided an exploration of how Egyptian intellectuals Ṭanṭawī Jawharī and ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Islāmbūlī utilized esotericism as cultural tools and discursive platforms. Their stories underscore the multifaceted responses to colonial influence and highlight the formation of a distinct Egyptian intellectual ethos during the long nineteenth century. This contribution situated Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī's contributions within the larger socio-political, religious, and cultural frameworks that defined this transformative period in Egypt.

I set out to capture the nuanced ways in which they engaged with, adapted, and redefined esotericism within their context. They integrated esotericism with socio-political objectives to construct a narrative of Eastern unity and intellectual sovereignty. The article illustrates how both figures shared common ground in their rural roots, an admiration for Eastern traditions, and a desire to resist Western cultural dominance. Whilst one came from the peasant class and the other from the merchant class, their roads converged in fin-de-siècle Egypt through print media. With their writings and public influence, Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī presented a vision of spiritual Easternism that reoriented the discourse around modernity, presenting it as compatible with a spiritual, religious, and

114. Al-Islāmbūlī, “Al-Itijāhāt al-haditha” 539.

intellectual heritage grounded in the East. This vision not only bridged the divide between secular and religious thought but also unified various Eastern cultures under a shared identity.

Jawharī advocated for an intellectual synthesis between science and esotericism. His exposure to a range of texts, from Hermetic philosophies to Western esoteric and scientific works, enabled him to craft a unique epistemological stance that affirmed both the material and spiritual dimensions of human experience. This integration was crucial to revitalizing an Egyptian identity that was deeply aware of its spiritual roots and yet responsive to modern scientific inquiries. His approach to spiritual Easternism countered Western Orientalist portrayals that often dismissed Islamic esotericism as antiquated or irrational. By positing science and religion as mutually reinforcing, rather than oppositional, Jawharī established a model of intellectual synthesis that promoted a distinctly Egyptian form of modernity.

On the other hand, al-Islāmbūlī transformed the principles he learned from Jawharī into the core ethos of his periodical, *Al-Ma'rifa*. Through *Al-Ma'rifa*, he advocated for Eastern solidarity and intellectual exchange with the West. Unlike Jawharī, al-Islāmbūlī's connection with Western thought was filtered through a journalistic lens, leading him to cultivate a dialogue that not only embraced elements of modern Spiritualism but actively sought to reform Orientalist narratives. *Al-Ma'rifa* became a forum for discussing and critiquing Western esotericism and materialism, presenting the East not as an exoticized "other" but as a repository of wisdom and enlightenment. He openly challenged Western-centric notions of progress, situating Eastern Spiritualism as an antidote. Al-Islāmbūlī's contribution embodied the spirit of Eastern intellectual autonomy, offering a voice for Egypt's emerging modern class of *efendiyya* to engage with global discourses on their own terms.

Both men's intellectual endeavors are responses to the disruptions caused by colonialism, particularly the erasure of local governance and autonomy in Egypt. Their engagements with Spiritualism were thus not escapist, but were rather

rooted in a commitment to reclaim and reinterpret Egyptian identity in a time of crisis. Through their works, Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī bridged intellectual and social divides in Egyptian society, fostering a collective identity that transcended class boundaries. Their appeal to both the educated elite and self-enculturated migrant-turned-*efendi* suggests that spiritual Easternism resonated as a unifying force, fostering a shared sense of purpose and cultural pride among Egyptians—although it was a short-lived project in Egyptian history.

Of particular importance here is the attempt to re-evaluate the function and use of esotericism within Egyptian society beyond a Western-centric framework. I present an analysis that sets spiritual Easternism as more than a local adaptation of European occultism; instead, it was a reclamation of an indigenous esoteric heritage that sought to counterbalance Western hegemony. Figures like Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī were not simply passive recipients of Western thought; they critically engaged with it, transforming imported ideas into catalysts for cultural revival and socio-political resilience. This approach calls for a reexamination of the global history of esotericism, shifting the focus away from a unidirectional diffusion model and toward a multilateral exchange where non-Western intellectuals actively shaped and redefined spiritual discourse.

Furthermore, the article sheds light on the role of print media in disseminating these ideas. Periodicals like *Al-Ma'rifa* served as crucial venues for intellectual exchange and ideological formation, enabling figures like al-Islāmbūlī to reach a wide audience. Through these publications, Egyptian intellectuals were able to shape an imagined identity that was inclusive of spiritual and esoteric traditions, resisting both Western materialism and reductionist interpretations of Islam. The print culture of the period was not merely a tool for disseminating information; it was a space where new forms of subjectivity and collective consciousness were forged. Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī's engagement with Spiritualism through print media illustrates the transformative potential of intellectual exchange in redefining social identities and cultural narratives.

In conclusion, the article encapsulates the dynamic intellectual landscape of fin-de-siècle Egypt, where figures like Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī leveraged spiritual Easternism as a means to navigate the tensions between tradition and modernity. By embracing esotericism, they challenged the binaries of material/spiritual and East/West, proposing an identity that was both modern and deeply rooted in Eastern spiritual heritage. Their work exemplifies the resilience of indigenous cultures in the face of colonialism, as well as the transformative power of intellectual synthesis in creating new cultural paradigms.

Ultimately, the article invites readers to reconsider the ways in which esotericism can function as a political and cultural force. For Jawharī and al-Islāmbūlī, spiritual Easternism was more than a philosophical stance; it was a form of historical therapeutics—a means of healing and reorienting Egyptian society amidst the cultural dislocation of colonialism. Their advocacy for a spiritual revival grounded in Eastern traditions continues to offer insights into the possibilities of cross-cultural dialogue and intellectual autonomy. Through their lives and legacies, I underscore the importance of acknowledging diverse pathways to modernity and the role of esotericism as a cornerstone in the construction of postcolonial identities.

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Working-Class Aeon: The Films of Kenneth Anger, Class Imagery, and the Thelemic New Aeon

Nicholas Laccetti

nicholas.laccetti@gcas.ie

Abstract

The independent cinema of American filmmaker Kenneth Anger (1927–2023) has long been scrutinized for its experimental cinematic techniques, links to the history of American counterculture, and influence from occult theory and practice, especially Anger’s own esoteric religion of Thelema—whose founder, English occultist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), provided much of the philosophical and theological underpinnings. Indeed, a number of Anger’s films dramatize the ascendancy of the Thelemic New Aeon of Horus. Yet the trappings of youth culture, counterculture, and homoeroticism which abound in Anger’s films—bikers, car customizers, rock and roll soundtracks, psychedelia—also have a class component: these aesthetic and cultural trappings are not merely signifiers of social rebellion, but also historically coded as working-class, a status utilized by the counterculture in its reaction against repressive midcentury American values. Through the mediation of Anger’s films, then, class as a category, along with its signifiers in American culture, enters the dynamic of Crowley’s New Aeon, and the rise of the Crowned and Conquering Child takes on a rebellious class component.

Keywords: Anger, Kenneth; Cinema; Crowley, Aleister; Economic Class; Thelema; 1960s

Working-Class Aeon: The Films of Kenneth Anger, Class Imagery, and the Thelemic New Aeon

The independent cinema of American filmmaker Kenneth Anger (1927–2023) has long been scrutinized for its experimental cinematic techniques, links to the history of American counterculture, and influence from underground occult theory and practice, especially Anger’s own esoteric religion of Thelema—whose founder, English occultist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), provided much of the philosophical and theological underpinnings.¹ Indeed, a number of Anger’s films explicitly dramatize the ascendancy of the Thelemic New Aeon of Horus. But the trappings of youth culture, counterculture, and homoeroticism which abound in Anger’s films also have a class component: these aesthetic and cultural trappings are not merely signifiers of social rebellion, but also historically coded as working-class, a status utilized by the counterculture in its reaction against repressive midcentury American values. Through the mediation of Anger’s films, then, class as a category, along with its signifiers in American culture, enters the dynamic of Crowley’s New Aeon, and the rise of the Crowned and Conquering Child takes on a rebellious class component. This paper will examine Anger’s countercultural imagery in terms of its relationship to class in the United States, and interpret how the matrix of that imagery allowed Anger to signify the Thelemic New Aeon—and how this usage complicates and enriches Crowley’s original esoteric philosophy.

Most commentators and critics of Kenneth Anger recognize the influence of Aleister Crowley and the occult, and the subcultural content of his imagery. For example, a recent article written upon Anger’s death in 2023 hit upon all of the usual suspects in its retrospective, mentioning his “obsession with all things Hollywood”; the “conflation of bikers, Nazis, biblical footage, and a jar of mustard” in *Scorpio Rising*; “psychedelic drugs,” Anaïs Nin, Marjorie

1. While they were once only accessible through art house screenings and the independent film circuit, Anger’s films are now widely available on the Internet and on DVD—see *The Complete Magicke Lantern Cycle*.

Cameron (and her connection to Jack Parsons) in *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*; Crowley’s “polymorph perversity”; Anger’s attempt at a “pagan revival”; musicians and/or murderers Jimmy Page, Mick Jagger, Marianne Faithfull, Bobby Beausoleil, and the Manson Family.² Practically any account of Anger’s work mentions these same themes and influences.

However, critics’ engagement with Anger’s Thelemic context and subcultural imagery is often extremely perfunctory, when it is even accurate. Commentator interest in Crowley or Thelema usually remains on the level of shock value—Crowley as a “black magician,” the “wickedest man in the world,” or a worshipper of Satan. Tom Zito’s mention of Boleskine House, for example, explains accurately that Crowley used the Scottish manor to perform the *Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage*, but also suggests that this operation was primarily about “summoning the 12 kings and dukes of hell.”³ Meanwhile, John Calendo’s 1976 profile of Anger mentions “the satanist Aleister Crowley,” whose ideology preached “that evil was a positive principle,” and Calendo is unable to avoid the notion that Anger is an “agent of Lucifer” whose “aesthetic of darkness may be sultry and velvet,” but is in reality “cold and belittling.”⁴ Not much has changed in the popular perception of Anger, Crowley, and the occult in the last forty-plus years.

On another level, the engagement with Anger’s subcultural influences usually ignores the class component to his imagery—not that this is unique to Kenneth Anger scholarship. In fact, the invisibility of economic class has been a feature of all but the most recent scholarship on American culture as a whole, following what Vivek Chibber has called the late twentieth-century “cultural turn” in social theory.⁵ The fact that Anger’s favored imagery—including homoerotic sailors, the rituals of Hell’s Angels, youthful rebellion, rock and roll music, psychedelia, car customizers, surfers, and more, not to mention the

2. Zito, “Look Back on Anger.”

3. Zito, “Look Back on Anger.”

4. Calendo, “Kenneth Anger Rising,” 60, 114.

5. See Chibber, *The Class Matrix*, 4–9.

Thelemic occultism already mentioned—is drawn from mid-century American counterculture is not a deep insight; numerous scholars of Anger’s work argue that he “both glamourise[s] and reinforce[s] countercultural membership.”⁶ But the class origins and matrix of such imagery have rarely been discussed, if only because late twentieth-century cultural studies scarcely addresses the topic of economic class to begin with. As Chibber argues, the “focus on ideas and meaning” in social theory after the cultural turn “has encouraged a turn away from structural analysis and toward the valuation of contingency of social phenomena, and further, an insistence upon the local and particular, as against the more universalizing claims of traditional class theory.”⁷ When it comes to Anger’s work, this means that the various social phenomena he relies upon for his imagery have been seen as individually chosen subcultural identifications for the purposes of personal expression against conformist American society—but not in a way that emerges from the material class position of his subjects or characters.

Ignoring the objective reality of class causes an overemphasis in Anger criticism on judging whether his work is “liberative” or “problematic” in terms of individual agency, rather than understanding the social structures from which the work’s imagery emerges, and thus its historical or, Thelemically speaking, *aeonic* context. This is a phenomenon that is very common in recent commentary on Anger’s films. For example, a recent piece by Sam Moore on Anger’s work as queer cinema laments that films like Anger’s are becoming rarer, with “less and less space for cinema that’s at once as experimental and excessive as Anger’s,” and with queer cinema today not willing to “venture into the kind of territory that gets called ‘toxic,’ or ‘problematic’—for something to be given that label in the 21st century is for it to be tarnished, to be considered a failure of representation.”⁸ What is lost in this “cultural turn” in analysis of works like Anger’s is the ways in which cultural productions emerge from the matrix of class.

6. Powell, “The Occult,” 121.

7. Chibber, “Rescuing Class.”

8. Moore, “Happy Birthday, Kenneth Anger.”

Kenneth Anger, of course, was not a Marxist theorist, nor did he identify as a socialist or communist. In interviews, though he suggested he rejected working in mainstream Hollywood in the 1950s at least in part due to the Red Scare, which he once called “the ridiculous witch-hunt of reds,” he also made it clear that he “wasn’t a communist, [he] just found it very unpleasant.” Anger’s films are ambiguous in terms of their stance toward capitalism—on the one hand, their countercultural transgression suggests an agreement with what Matthew Hughes calls “the Sixties countercultural paradigm,” which “saw the idealised forms of subjectivity produced by post-war US capitalism as serial, standardised, and crucially, ‘inauthentic’; as something to be overcome,” while on the other hand, Anger deeply enjoyed and eroticized the cultural commodities of that same post-war society, from Hollywood films to popular fashion to American car culture.¹⁰

In her piece on the commodity fetishism of *Scorpio Rising*, Rachel Moore describes “the eroticism that features” in the film as “a genuine come-on from the world of lively things,” including “leather jackets, studded belts, chains, toys, icons, motorcycles and bikers’ gear,” which Anger “filmed in adoring floods of light.”¹¹ Moore cites Walter Benjamin on the relationship between the working class and commodities: “If [the proletariat] wanted to achieve virtuosity in this kind of enjoyment, it could not spurn empathising with commodities. It had to enjoy this identification with all the pleasure and the uneasiness, which derived from a presentiment of its own destiny as a class.”¹² Moore is interested in Benjamin’s description of commodities in the Paris arcades as

9. Hattenstone, “Kenneth Anger.” In another interview, Anger states that he “never worked in Hollywood because [he] had a political conscience. The Red Scare—fear of communism—was just a bluff for people like McCarthy to gain power. At 20th Century Fox you had to take a loyalty oath and swear you wouldn’t do anything bad to the United States. I said: ‘Forget it.’” Needham, “Kenneth Anger.”

10. Hughes, “The Films of Kenneth Anger.”

11. Moore, “Cultural Bolshevism,” 73.

12. Benjamin quoted in Buck-Morss, “Walter Benjamin,” cited in Moore, “Cultural Bolshevism,” 76.

“dream-images of the collective,” suggesting that Kenneth Anger’s own displays of commodities in *Scorpio Rising* “become collective dream images,” specifically of the “gay collective,” rendering “society’s commodities the meta-narrative of gay culture.”¹³ However, Moore seems to miss the Marxian end of the Benjamin quote here: the working class could not “spurn” empathizing with commodities because, according to Marx, its own “destiny as a class” was to become the ultimate commodity; under capitalism, the proletariat’s labor-power is the commodity that is ultimately transformed into the fetishized commodities that feature in both the Paris arcades and *Scorpio Rising*.¹⁴ These commodities function as “dream-images of the collective” because the working class, as a class, is destined to become commodified; working-class people themselves are fetishized objects under capitalism.

Even if Anger wasn’t a Marxist himself, he did seem to intuitively understand this process of commodification. Anger’s very short film *Kustom Kar Kommandos* perhaps illustrates this the most concisely out of his oeuvre.¹⁵ In this film, as Tony Rayns explains, Anger “evokes the Dream Lover” by fetishizing a hot rod which is sensuously serviced by a young man (Sandy Trent, “the Maker”) wielding “a giant white powder puff.”¹⁶ The images in the film “are suffused with a pink glow from the background,” all set to The Paris Sisters’ pop song “Dream Lover.”¹⁷ At the end of the film, in “a hallucinatory shot of Sandy’s reflection on the inside of the passenger Kar door, there is a moment of fusion—the colour elements (pink, azure, red, and the dull amber of the Kar itself) fuse, and Maker and Kar are one.”¹⁸ This moment of erotic fusion between the “Maker,” a blue collar youth, and the commodity fetish of his hot rod, all under the

13. Moore, “Cultural Bolshevism,” 77.

14. See Marx’s *Capital*, Vol. 1’s sixth chapter, on the buying and selling of labor-power.

15. Thanks belong to the second anonymous reviewer of this paper for suggesting a similar interpretation of Anger’s *Kustom Kar Kommandos* as the one I give here.

16. Rayns, “Lucifer,” 15.

17. Rayns, “Lucifer,” 15.

18. Rayns, “Lucifer,” 16.

libidinal gaze of Anger’s camera, strongly implies that Anger understood how working-class men (“makers” or “producers”) are themselves transformed into fetishized commodities precisely because of the virile masculinity that Anger celebrates—their ability to labor.¹⁹ As in Benjamin’s formulation, these working-class men are led to enjoy their “identification with all the pleasure and the uneasiness” of the commodities they produce—in this case the hot rod of the American car customizer subculture—due to their “presentiment of [their] own destiny as a class,” their own commodification.

However much Anger shows an awareness of these Marxian concepts, though, it is clear that his primary interest is in the libidinal energy unleashed by such images of working-class masculinity, energy only made possible by the commodification system of post-war American capitalism. Ultimately, Anger’s use of class imagery in his films is a fetishization and eroticization of working-class men, not a discourse on class struggle or a commentary on Marxian analysis. But his use of such imagery is not merely for sexual or aesthetic enjoyment, either: his eroticization of the class elements in his work heralds the coming of an insurgent, rebellious New Aeon signified by the libidinal energies of those elements.

This is because, for Anger, the structure that precedes culture and is causal to the subcultural and countercultural styles he highlights in his films is an esoteric historical structure, the concept of aeons—Crowley’s assertion of the advent of the New Aeon of Horus following the end of the Old Aeon of Osiris, upon his reception of the Thelemic holy text *The Book of the Law* in 1904. Anger’s aeonic “newness” comes on two levels: the very challenge of his form of underground cinema to mainstream cultural production in contemporary America, and the New Aeonic interpretation his films give to American

19. In Anger’s original prospectus for the full-length version of *Kustom Kar Kommandos*, Anger himself suggests that the “treatment of the teenager in relation to his hot-rod or custom car . . . will bring out what I see as a definite *eroticization* of the automobile,” in its “dual aspect of narcissistic identification as virile power symbol,” as well as its role as an “attention-grabbing” status symbol in American (especially Californian) youth culture. See Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 111.

subcultures and their countercultural productions. But this esoteric view of history does not necessarily undermine the reemergence of economic class as an analytic category—for Anger’s use of specific class imagery in his films alters Crowley’s aeonic theory to suggest that the emergence of certain working-class subcultures out of their material social relations, and the transgressive cultural practices and productions which follow, is actually *aligned* with the coincident emergence of the Aeon of Horus, itself a revolutionary and even apocalyptic historical reality. That Crowley considered esoteric aeonic shifts to be mirrored in social relations is clear in his writings, for example in his description of the structure of his fraternal society, Ordo Templi Orientis, when he writes: “in True Things, all are but images one of another; man is but a map of the universe, and Society is but the same on a larger scale.”²⁰ And Crowley even includes the necessity of revolutionary social change in his map of the organization, which is meant to mirror society and in turn to mirror the macrocosm and its succession of aeons; he suggests that the structure of O.T.O. itself “conceals even the seeds of revolution, by which alone progress can be effected.”²¹

Importantly, though, a Thelemite like Kenneth Anger, perhaps unlike a Marxist revolutionary, is not trying to *bring about* the revolutionary New Aeon; the New Aeon of Horus *is already here*, and in a violent manner full of “force and fire”—a saying from Crowley’s *Book of the Law*, and Anger’s “magical motto”—not in a fragile or halting way.²² Anger’s work documents the New Aeon’s reverberations in American popular culture, and these reverberations possess a rebellious class component because the esoteric shift in aeons mirrors historical societal shifts, emerging as they do from “the seeds of revolution.” As Anger said upon his return to America in the early 1960s about his new interest in youth

20. Crowley, “Liber CXCIV.”

21. Crowley, “Liber CXCIV.”

22. “Beauty and strength, leaping laughter and delicious languor, force and fire, are of us.” *Liber AL vel Legis* II:20; cited by Anger as his “magical motto” in his notes for the 1966 screenings of the *Magick Lantern Cycle* and reproduced in Powell, “The Occult,” 123n11.

subcultures, it was “in the teenage cults that magic emerges into the contemporary world.”²³ Anger’s films, working through light and symbolism as magical rituals aimed at “capturing people,” are intended to subconsciously unlock the potential of his viewers to realize their own True Wills, bringing them in line with the “inertia of the universe” itself in its shift into the Aeon of the Child.²⁴ This is the true goal of Thelemic magick, which Anger states is his “lifework.”²⁵ We will now turn to an examination of several of Anger’s major works to see how this framework alters the usual reading both of Anger’s films and the Thelemic doctrine of the New Aeon that Anger was dedicated to throughout his life.

Fireworks (1947)

Anger began to utilize class imagery within his universe of queer sexuality and symbolist drama from his earliest films. *Fireworks*, Anger’s “earliest distributed film” according to Anna Powell, uses the imagery of working-class sailors and assigns them with both inducing the sexual awakening, as well as committing the violent murder, of the protagonist—the dreamer—played by Anger himself.²⁶ The primary sailor, played by Gordon Gray, is simultaneously the dreamer’s murderer and his Virgin Mary figure, as seen in the repeated initial image of the broken body of the dreamer in the sailor’s arms as in the Christian pietà. By the end of the film, when the dreamer has returned to bed—but now sleeping next to a man whose head radiates light, an early Lucifer image in Anger’s oeuvre—it is clear that the events of the film, violent and sexual as they are, constitute an initiatory experience that has transformed the dreamer.

Fireworks is a groundbreaking and early work of queer cinema, but Anger is also clear in interviews that its meaning goes beyond sexual representation.

23. Calendo, “Kenneth Anger Rising,” 114.

24. Anger cited in Brottman, “Introduction,” 6; Crowley’s explanation of following one’s True Will as joining with the inertia of the universe is in the first chapter of Crowley, *Magick Without Tears*.

25. Powell, “The Occult,” 123n11.

26. Powell, “The Occult,” 73.

There is a major element of class and racial tension built into the film as well. When an interviewer in one piece states that the film is “intensely homoerotic,” Anger certainly doesn’t disagree, but he also states that the film is “about being attracted to something you’re afraid of. You’re attracted to something that’s particularly dangerous like a rough, tough man can be, like a working man can be... I knew not to do what the young man in the film does, which is to ask them for a light for their cigarette. Back in the 40’s, that was an old pick-up line.”²⁷ Anger describes the genesis of the film’s imagery in the Zoot Suit Riots in 1943 Los Angeles, in which American servicemen attacked and stripped young Mexican Americans and other people of color who were wearing zoot suits, ostensibly because they considered the clothing to be unpatriotic during World War II. Anger’s recurring dream about being chased by sailors after the riots inspired the film.²⁸

The association of white working-class men—sailors in this case, but also bikers, blue collar workers, and other archetypes—with queer sexuality is not unique to Anger’s film. Groundbreaking gay artists such as Tom of Finland, both earlier than and contemporaneously with Anger, “would often draw muscular gay men wearing chaps, sailor outfits, jeans and other garments historically associated with working-class male culture, typically with little else on.”²⁹ Tom of Finland suggested that it was his experience during World War II that began his fetishistic interest in uniformed men, especially sailors and Nazi officers.³⁰ Anger similarly claimed that he had “served in the United States Navy when [he] was a teenager in the closing days of World War II,” though he didn’t serve the whole term due to coming down with scarlet fever.³¹ He has also regularly suggested that the sailors (and their uniforms) in the film were

27. Hays, “Kenneth Anger, Director.”

28. Hays, “Kenneth Anger, Director.”

29. George, “The Queer and Dirty History of Chaps.”

30. Hooven, *Tom of Finland*, 30.

31. Rose, “A Conversation.” I have not been able to verify the claim that Anger served in the Navy elsewhere.

real U.S. Navy sailors, a claim which has been contested by Ed Earle, a friend of Anger's.³² In any case, Anger states that *Fireworks* contains all he has “to say about being seventeen, the United States Navy, American Christmas, and the Fourth of July”—encapsulating, I would suggest, Anger's early reflections on militaristic Christian America in general, especially its potential for race- and class-based violence, but also its homoerotic fascination.³³

The reference to the racially-motivated Zoot Suit Riots, the fetishization of American military officers, and the suggestion and threat of class-based violence (and the contribution of these things to early gay subculture) all contribute to *Fireworks*' imagery. But the simple notion of a young man propositioning a sailor for “a light” also takes on religious significance, both in terms of the film's internal logic and Anger's commitment to Thelema, and because Lucifer the Lightbearer is Anger's primary image for the Thelemic Horus. Anger summarizes the plot of *Fireworks* as follows: “A dissatisfied dreamer awakes, goes out in the night seeking a ‘light’ and is drawn through the needle's eye. A dream of a dream, he returns to bed less empty than before.”³⁴ “Less empty” both due to the violent sexual encounter the film portrays, perhaps, but also due to the contact he has made with the angelic figure who now occupies his bed—an appropriate image for the Knowledge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel which, in Thelema, is “the central and essential work” of the magician.³⁵ Combined with the class and sexual imagery, it interpolates the Americana of the film—the United States Navy, “American Christmas,” the Fourth of July, etc.—with the initiatory system that Anger learned from studying the works of Aleister Crowley. It also suggests that Anger's personal homoerotic interest in “rough, tough” working-class men has a direct relationship with the Thelemic

32. Rose, “A Conversation.” Earle is quoted as contesting this claim in Landis, *Anger: The Unauthorized Biography*, 44–5.

33. Brown, “The Extraordinary Life.”

34. Smith, “Kustom Film Kommando.”

35. Crowley, *Magick Without Tears*, 502.

magician's goal of (mystically erotic) union with his Holy Guardian Angel—not in spite of, but because of, the possibility of insurgent class violence, which here takes on an initiatory value.³⁶

Anna Powell (drawing on a suggestion by Robert Haller) argues that the film mirrors Crowley's *Liber Pyramidos*, a self-initiatory ritual written for the occultist's A.:A.: magical order and influenced by Crowley's early initiatory experiences with the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (indeed, the *Pyramidos* ritual is Crowley's version of the Golden Dawn's Neophyte ceremony, which Crowley underwent in 1898).³⁷ According to Powell:

On the mundane level, we witness a sadomasochistic, homophobic attack in the Gents lavatory. The underlying theme, however, is Crowleyan in inspiration: an initiate's symbolic death, rebirth and self-realisation. It has been linked by Robert Haller to the ritual of The Building of the Pyramid (*Liber Pyramidos*) in which the candidate undergoes a rigorous self-initiation. The Dreamer (played by Anger himself) seeks Lucifer as well as a light for his cigarette.³⁸

However, I think it would be more helpful to remember that all similar initiatory sequences, in esoteric contexts derived from Freemasonry (as the Golden Dawn's ceremony was, and as Crowley's later rituals were indirectly), constitute a death and rebirth sequence that occultists like Crowley saw as containing the hidden inner meaning of both the Christ story—which is implicitly present in Anger's film through the references to the pietà and to Christmas—and the Osiris myth. After all, the quest—specifically, the *request*—for “light” is the classic encapsulation of the Masonic initiatory journey, and a repeated motif in Masonic initiation rituals, mirroring the dreamer's request for “a light” in the film.³⁹ For Crowley, this death and rebirth sequence is important both for the individual initiate (the microcosm)

36. Though the film was initially inspired by the racially motivated Zoot Suit Riots, I would argue that Anger's casting of himself in the role of the dreamer (and his comments on the film) shifts the valence of the violence in the film to be primarily sexual and class-based.

37. Powell, “The Occult,” 73.

38. Powell, “The Occult,” 73.

39. See, for example, Béresniak, *Symbols of Freemasonry*, 40.

and for cosmic history as a whole (the macrocosm), linked as it is in the former case to the realization of the initiate’s True Will, and in the latter case to the ending of the Old Aeon of Osiris and the inauguration of the New Aeon of Horus.

Crowley’s clearest interpretation of the Christ/Osiris myth in its relationship to Masonic initiation ritual and to the advent of the New Aeon is contained within his retelling “in dramatic form” of “the central mystery of Freemasonry,” his 1913 play *The Ship*.⁴⁰ *The Ship* tells the story of a “high priest of the Sun” named John, whose primary purpose is to celebrate a Eucharistic feast of corn and wine and tend to a vesica-shaped shrine.⁴¹ During the course of the play John is murdered in ritualistic, Christ-like fashion by three assassins seeking “the secret of the shrine.” After the assassins are dealt with and the corpse of the high priest is sent across the sea, John returns to life in a resurrection scene: “The wrappings fall from the corpse, and the youth John is seen beardless and smiling. He is dressed in the crown and robes of his father.” The Young John, now the high priest, speaks a monologue that clearly identifies himself with Christ or the Logos, the Incarnation of God—“I am that I am,” “creating Word,” “very God of very God,” etc.—and suggests that this process of death and resurrection is a constant one: “I am he that daily dieth, / And is daily born again.”⁴²

Finally, the Young John celebrates the Eucharistic ritual of corn and wine, and then closes the play by beginning a choral antiphon that Crowley believed to be one of his most significant works, a poem he called the “Quia Patris.”⁴³ Described by Richard Kaczynski as “a sublime poem to the Higher Self,” it invokes the individual’s higher self or Holy Guardian Angel and suggests that this secret self is in fact the secret or god of the shrine for which the assassins

40. Crowley, *Confessions*, 714. Cited in Van Kleeck, “The Art of the Law.”

41. Crowley, *The Ship*, “Persons of the Mystery.”

42. Crowley, *The Ship*, scene II.

43. Kaczynski, *Perdurabo*, 264. Kaczynski later states that *The Ship*—specifically the “Quia Patris” portion from the conclusion—“had always been a poem of great import to Crowley, and he worked it into many rituals, including the Gnostic Mass,” the central ritual of Ordo Templi Orientis. Kaczynski, *Perdurabo*, 392.

had been searching.⁴⁴ Taken as a whole, *The Ship* suggests that the High Priest John's sequence of death and rebirth is also the cosmic aeonic cycle—the old god or Father/Osiris must die so that the Child or son, the Young John/Horus, can rise in his place—and that this sequence, which constantly recurs, is also the secret of the individual initiate's higher self—the death of the old self must constantly take place so that the “centre and secret of the Sun,” of which our mundane self is just the “vehicle,” can shine forth, just as a “rosy light streams thence and fills the holy place” in the final stage direction of the play.⁴⁵

Anger's *Fireworks*, like Crowley's *The Ship*, dramatizes an initiatory sequence on two levels. On the microcosmic level, it is the journey of the initiate into violent death and mystical rebirth, and the gaining of “more light,” or union with one's higher self, in the process; on the macrocosmic level, it is the initiation of the cosmos into the New Aeon, following the death or eclipse of Osiris, who ruled the previous aeon, and the birth of the Child Horus—also known in Thelemic terms as Ra-Hoor-Khuit. The latter movement, which Crowley (and Thelemites following him, like Kenneth Anger) believed dawned in 1904 with his reception of *The Book of the Law* from his own Holy Guardian Angel, is also known in his

44. See Crowley, *The Ship*, scene II:

“Thou, who art I, beyond all I am,
 Who hast no nature and no name,
 Who art, when all but thou are gone,
 Thou, centre and secret of the Sun,
 Thou, hidden spring of all things known
 And unknown, Thou aloof, alone,
 Thou, the true fire within the reed
 Brooding and breeding, source and seed
 Of life, love, liberty, and light,
 Thou beyond speech and beyond sight,
 Thee I invoke, abiding one,
 Thee, centre and secret of the Sun,
 And that most holy mystery
 Of which the vehicle am I!”

45. Crowley, *The Ship*, scene II.

writings as the Equinox of the Gods (after a Golden Dawn ritual), the changing of the aeon taking place macrocosmically like the changing of the seasons. As *The Book of the Law* says, “Abrogate are all rituals, all ordeals, all words and signs. Ra-Hoor-Khuit hath taken his seat in the East at the Equinox of the Gods.”⁴⁶

However, Anger’s portrayal of this mythic cycle in *Fireworks* is quite different in flavor from Crowley’s in *The Ship*, the latter being a hieratic mystery play that reads more like a liturgy or, indeed, like a Masonic ritual. In *The Ship*, “the secret of the shrine” is just that, a divine power contained in a venerated shrine; *Fireworks*, meanwhile, symbolizes this “centre and secret of the Sun” which the dreamer seeks as a light for his cigarette. The ruffians who kill the central figure in *The Ship* are exoticized, allegorical foreigners; in *Fireworks* they are working-class American sailors, eroticized tough guys. The process of rebirth in *The Ship* is a ritualized funeral, the corpse of the high priest being sent into the abyss of the sea; in *Fireworks* it is a suspicious white liquid pouring down upon the dreamer’s lifeless body. And the actual rebirth at the end of *The Ship* is quite literal, followed by a Eucharistic ritual; in *Fireworks* it is signified by a Fourth of July firework emerging out of a sailor’s crotch, by the Christmas tree on the head of the dreamer, by the burning of the pietà photographs. Finally, the “ritual” of *Fireworks* is concluded in post-coital bliss, the dreamer sharing his bed with a man whose head shines with light (Lucifer, Horus, the Holy Guardian Angel). *Fireworks* uses humor, eroticism and contemporary imagery, where *The Ship* is not very different from Crowley’s more “official” religious instructions, like the Gnostic Mass (which indeed includes the final portion of *The Ship* in its text). It could only have been written by Kenneth Anger in twentieth-century America—and it suggests that Crowley’s Aeon of the Child is not marked by the portentousness of old ritual forms, old “words and signs,” but in fact by the rebelliousness, queer eroticism, and danger of American working-class subcultures, especially youth subcultures, whose rise and visibility signals the coming of an apocalyptic new age.

46. *Liber AL vel Legis* I:49.

Anger would continue to dramatize the Thelemic aeonic sequence, illustrating on both the microcosmic and macrocosmic levels the death of the old God and the coming of the Child in almost all of the major films which would follow *Fireworks*. For example, Powell has noted that Anger's 1954 symbolist film, *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, signifies through its intense, apocalyptic imagery of fire, its "lavish costumes, elaborate sets and gorgeously jeweled colors" tending toward "stasis and a decadence turned in upon itself and drained of energy," that "the declining Piscean Age had to be destroyed before the New Aeon of Horus could be born."⁴⁷ *Scorpio Rising* and *Lucifer Rising* continue this dramatization of Crowley's aeonic cycle in even more explicit ways, and combine this esoteric symbolism with a continued interest in the imagery of working-class subcultures and counterculture rebelliousness.

Scorpio Rising (1963)

Anger's important short film *Scorpio Rising*, perhaps the film most responsible for putting him on the map in mid-twentieth-century counterculture, follows a similar trajectory to *Fireworks* and to Crowley's *The Ship*, and its references to working-class subcultures and youthful rebellion are heavily woven into the plot.⁴⁸ *Scorpio Rising* follows a young biker played by Bruce Byron in the title role, and is ultimately about the death drive and occultural violence of the young working-class biker subculture in America at the time: "Thanatos in chrome and black leather and bursting jeans."⁴⁹ As we have seen, Anger decided upon his return to the United States in the early 1960s that it was "in the teenage cults that magic emerges into the contemporary world."⁵⁰ In this assessment, he was

47. Powell, "The Occult," 73.

48. As Hutchison summarizes, "The reception of *Scorpio Rising* was widespread and international: from the art world, to music, to film, to fashion (*The New York Times* reported an overnight motorcycle chic)." Hutchison, *Kenneth Anger*, 139.

49. Anger cited in Powell, "The Occult," 89.

50. Calendo, "Kenneth Anger Rising," 114.

following Crowley's belief in the character of the New Aeon of the Child. Crowley describes the immaturity, fluid sexuality, and propensity for violence of the Aeon of Horus, as he saw it in the early twentieth century, in his introduction to *The Book of the Lam*,⁵¹ concluding the introduction by emphasizing, "We are children." Besides the air of distaste which the patrician Crowley seems to have here (he admits that the characteristics of the New Aeon "may be very repugnant to many people born before" 1904, which of course includes himself), many of the things described in this section could describe Kenneth Anger's preoccupations in his major films—the "popularity of the cinema," of course, but also queer sexuality, subcultural "enthusiasms," "innocence and irresponsibility," the saturation of violence and war in the media. For Anger in *Scorpio Rising*, concentrating on these themes was his attempt at "cluing in to popular American culture after having been away for eight years"; it thus also represents Anger's observations about how contemporary American working-class youth culture illustrates the dawn of the New Aeon, accomplishing in the filmic medium what Crowley did in the introduction to *The Book of the Lam*.⁵²

Anger first discovered the subject of the biker subculture by hanging out and photographing a group of bikers in Coney Island in the summer of 1962; according to Anger, "on the beach under the boardwalk" was also where he

51. "Observe for yourselves the decay of the sense of sin, the growth of innocence and irresponsibility, the strange modifications of the reproductive instinct with a tendency to become bisexual or epicene, the childlike confidence in progress combined with nightmare fear of catastrophe, against which we are yet half unwilling to take precautions.

Consider the outcrop of dictatorships, only possible when moral growth is in its earliest stages, and the prevalence of infantile cults like Communism, Fascism, Pacifism, Health Craze, Occultism in nearly all its forms, religions sentimentalised to the point of practical extinction.

Consider the popularity of the cinema, the wireless, the football pools and guessing competitions, all devices for soothing fractious infants, no seed of purpose in them.

Consider sport, the babyish enthusiasms and rages which it excites, whole nations disturbed by disputes between boys.

Consider war, the atrocities which occur daily and leave us unmoved and hardly worried." Crowley, "Introduction."

52. Anger cited in Hutchison, *Kenneth Anger*, 125.

conceived of the groundbreaking pop music soundtrack to the film, what he calls “a magical happening”: the “kids had their little transistors, and had them on . . . every single song that I used in *Scorpio* came out at the time that I made the film.”⁵³ Anger’s suggestion, then, is that he was merely documenting a series of magical synchronicities in *Scorpio Rising*; the film reflects the youth subculture of the day and what this means in an esoteric sense for America in general. Bruce Byron himself provided more of the motifs for the film; Byron’s home was already decorated with pictures of his idols, James Dean and Marlon Brando, and Anger suggests that Brando’s appearance as a rebel biker in *The Wild One* synchronously appeared on the television by chance while they were filming.⁵⁴ Critics have widely commented on the intercutting of images of Jesus (from a Christian missionary film), Adolf Hitler, Brando from *The Wild One*, and Byron’s *Scorpio* in the film; as Hutchison suggests, this juxtaposition of images implies “the potential fascist posturing implicated in hero-worship.”⁵⁵ She goes on to argue that “Anger took as many taboo emblems and hurled them together; but their juxtaposition with quintessential American icons and the local authorities raised the question of the American government’s (and consequentially, Hollywood’s and the media’s) culpability in the formation of youth cults”—suggesting, as Anger saw it, a parallel between “mass culture” and “blind religious following.”⁵⁶

But “ironically binding together incongruous rebel leaders,” set to pop tunes like “The Leader of the Pack” and “He’s a Rebel,” suggests more than just social commentary for Anger. The Thelemic religious overtones of the film imply, as Crowley suggests, that the rise of the New Aeon can be seen most clearly in the “youth cults,” the new religious fads, the hero-worship and fascistic posturing of rebel leaders. Perhaps the American government, Hollywood, and the media encouraged such dangers, but ultimately, as a Thelemite, Anger saw

53. Hutchison, *Kenneth Anger*, 125.

54. See Anger’s commentary for *The Complete Magick Lantern Cycle*.

55. Hutchison, *Kenneth Anger*, 129.

56. Hutchison, *Kenneth Anger*, 129.

the source of this new violence in contemporary culture as preordained by the changing of the aeons, not merely as a social failing on behalf of one institution or another. Hutchison suggests as much herself when she describes the film's year of production, 1962, as astrologically "the end of the 2000 year-long Piscean Age and the beginning of the Aquarian Age," for "occultists (including Anger) . . . the end of a period of Christian domination and the beginning of a period of pagan domination. The film invokes the breaking away from and purging of the old 'sin-sickened' age of violence, destruction, and death, leading to resurrection in the new age. Teen culture (pop songs, drug use, motorcycle cultists and adoption of cult icons and symbols) become manifestations of fomenting demonic forces."⁵⁷

Hutchison is right about the film's depiction of the changing aeons and the "Crowleyan iconography" in the film, but somewhat misleading about the character of the ages being depicted, and the role of the Christian mythos in the film.⁵⁸ Many critics mistakenly suggest that the use of the image of Jesus alongside Brando, James Dean, Hitler, and the bikers is merely blasphemous or anti-Christian; in fact, as we have seen in the analysis of Crowley's *The Ship*, the violent death of the old god through the Aeon of Osiris' sacrifice is necessary for the rise of the Child and the advent of the New Aeon. Like Jesus Christ, the High Priest John must be crucified in order to rise as immanently present as his son/resurrection, the Young John. This is the necessary cosmic cycle, and also a necessary experience for the initiate to pass through, with Scorpio in this film now taking the place of the dreamer from *Fireworks*. Scorpio must die for the New Aeon to begin, and all the attendant violence, sexuality, and rebelliousness to authority surrounding this initiation are the birth-pangs of Horus.

It is too simplistic, then, to interpret the use of the Brando/Hollywood myth and the Christian myth in the montage alongside Scorpio's biker subculture as mere contradiction, as Carel Rowe also does by stating that the juxtaposition of

57. Hutchison, *Kenneth Anger*, 128.

58. Hutchison, *Kenneth Anger*, 130.

images in the film constitute “extreme opposites.”⁵⁹ Rowe suggests that even “as the associations are made, one is aware of the artificiality, the invalidity of the Christian and Hollywood myths in contrast to Scorpio and his ritual.”⁶⁰ The quote from Anger which follows Rowe’s interpretation itself contradicts her take on this aspect of the film: “I also regard the inception of new concepts and viewpoints in the conflict between customary conception and particular representation as dynamic—as a dynamization of the ‘traditional view’ into a new one.”⁶¹ The “dynamization” of the traditional view in the montages of *Scorpio Rising* is how Scorpio and his subculture represents, rather than invalidates, the Christian savior mythos of Christ’s willing sacrifice, reinforced through the linkage between the Hollywood messiah of Brando and Scorpio, both being bikers. As in Crowley’s interpretation of the Christic Aeon of Osiris being succeeded by the Thelemic Aeon of Horus—which in a too simplistic interpretation is usually conceived as the latter destroying or merely contradicting the former—the Osirian Scorpio/Brando/Christ must die to inaugurate the New Aeon: Christ, Osiris, the High Priest John (in *The Ship*), the dreamer (in *Fireworks*), or Scorpio must be sacrificed so an apocalyptic new age can begin. The “traditional” view would see the Christian myth and Anger’s myth of the biker Scorpio as contradictory, as Rowe does; the “dynamized” new viewpoint—the Thelemic viewpoint—sees how Scorpio’s death drive, his leather-clad worship of the chromed Thanatos, is really the death drive of the Old Aeon, and a requirement for the New Aeon to begin—just as *Scorpio Rising* precedes *Lucifer Rising* in Anger’s oeuvre. It is the cosmos’ (and the initiate’s) erotic longing for the Aeon of the Child, a preordained cosmic cycle, playing out here uniquely in American culture. As Carolee Schneemann suggests in her review of the film for *Film Culture* magazine, “That old god submitted to his cross, and these willful ones struggle to intensify their destruction by his own—bearing his cross against their sex.”⁶²

59. Rowe, *Baudelairean Cinema*, 82.

60. Rowe, *Baudelairean Cinema*, 83.

61. Rowe, *Baudelairean Cinema*, 83.

62. Schneemann, “*Scorpio Rising*,” 279.

What is also missed in these typical accounts of *Scorpio Rising*, as alluded to above in the description of how Anger came up with the bikers as subject matter, is the working-class character of these aeonic role models. *Scorpio* depicts not merely the rise of a violent new youth culture in America to mark the death of the Old Aeon, but the rise of a *working-class* subculture rebellious to traditional authority, a subculture containing “the seeds of revolution, by which alone progress can be effected,” as Crowley put it, though perhaps not progress in a straightforward or morally acceptable way, and certainly not easily aligned with one or another political ideology (after all, for all its supposedly problematic fascist imagery, the American Nazi Party protested the film and—Anger claimed—sued him for the use of their flag).⁶³ The references to Marlon Brando and James Dean in *Scorpio Rising* are not just class-neutral Hollywood references, but in fact an aesthetic of working-class revolt. The clothing and aesthetic styles utilized by the bikers—all denim and leather—referencing Hollywood wild ones and rebels like Brando and Dean (not to mention Elvis, the apotheosized American hillbilly who appears on the film’s soundtrack singing “You’re the Devil in Disguise”), were originally “working men’s garments worn by miners, manual laborers and cowboys,” as a *New York Times* review on the history of denim puts it.⁶⁴ Denim, used widely in the military uniforms fetishized by Tom of Finland, Anger, and others, became seen as a “great equalizer” after World War II. But it wasn’t until Hollywood idols like Brando donned denim (and leather) in movies like *On the Waterfront* and *The Wild One* that such aesthetic choices became seen as the clothing of “the downtrodden good guys.”⁶⁵ In 1955’s *Rebel Without a Cause*, James Dean added youth revolt to the rebellious new meaning of such clothes; according to fashion archivist Tonya Blazio-Licorish, “seeing Dean clad in denim reinforced [youth’s] rejections of ‘the stuffiness and buttoned-

63. Landis, 128.

64. Kakutani, “Call It Jeanitics.” For Elvis’ working-class roots and their political meanings, see Campbell, “Elvis Presley as Redneck,” 93–102.

65. Nishimura, “Denim.”

up nature’ of their parents’ generation.”⁶⁶ Eventually, these fashion motifs would be donned by the anti-war and Civil Rights protestors of the 1960s, a style choice among young protestors that has continued up until the present day.⁶⁷ However, these styles “can’t be totally divorced from their working-class, grassroots history,” according to fashion scholar Mark-Evan Blackman.⁶⁸

Anger’s occultural rebels in *Scorpio Rising* are working-class heroes of a sort, too, marked both by their attire and by the roots of the biker subculture. Before they became “American popular heroes” precisely due to an explosion of films like Anger’s, bikers were a real working-class subculture that Anger saw replacing the cowboys as a symbol of American freedom and anti-authoritarianism.⁶⁹ In a 1966 interview, he states that the real-life bikers in *Scorpio Rising* all had working-class roots in Brooklyn:

My group doesn’t have a name. They just hang around together. Most of them are married, have a couple of kids already, are in their early twenties. They got married just after high school. Most of them have jobs, either as truck drivers, mechanics, or unloading fish down at Fulton’s Fish Market. Most of them have an Italian background. I see the bike boys as the last romantics of this particular culture. They’re the last equivalents of the riders of the range, the cowboys.⁷⁰

Anger then suggests that the power of this subculture, even through their mere aesthetic style, is enough to bring the authorities down on them, referencing hanging out with three members of the Hell’s Angels, who, just for wearing “little sleeveless Levi jackets with ‘Hell’s Angels’ on them,” suddenly brought the attention of two police patrol wagons with riot dogs. “It’s like the fuzz were going to put down an insurrection,” he concludes.⁷¹ Hunter S. Thompson, after living with the Hell’s Angels while writing a book on them in the mid-1960s, similarly concludes

66. Cited in Nishimura, “Denim.”

67. Cited in Nishimura, “Denim.”

68. Cited in Nishimura, “Denim.”

69. Hutchison, *Kenneth Anger*, 127.

70. Hutchison, *Kenneth Anger*, 127–28.

71. Hutchison, *Kenneth Anger*, 127–28.

that they had roots among working-class American outcasts, the descendants of hillbillies, “Okies” and “Arkies” who migrated west to California during the Great Migration but could not find a place in middle-class suburban America after World War II.⁷² Thompson ultimately had a much less positive (or at least, enamored) view of the bikers than Anger did: “In terms of our Great Society the Hell’s Angels and their ilk are losers—dropouts, failures and malcontents. They are rejects looking for a way to get even with a world in which they are only a problem.”⁷³ Rather than a moral vanguard, Thompson suggested that the only thing the bikers had in common with college protestors and anti-war demonstrators is “their disdain for the present, or the status quo”—essentially a remarkably prescient forerunner of today’s Trumpenproletariat “basket of deplorables,” rhetoric that almost sounds word for word like Thompson’s conclusion about the Hell’s Angels.

Regardless of their specific political potential, the insurrectionary character of the biker subculture (and its aesthetic style) becomes representative of the death drive of the Old Aeon and the violent advent of the New Aeon in Anger’s hands—simultaneously working-class, youthful, anti-authoritarian, specifically American, and inexorably linked to the force and fire of the Thelemic Horus, Anger’s Lucifer. This brings us to Anger’s final statement on the New Aeon, the deeply Thelemic film and experimental milestone *Lucifer Rising*, which we will now turn to by way of concluding this account of the working-class character of Anger’s New Aeon.

Lucifer Rising (1972)

As the most explicit depiction in Anger’s work of the birth of the Aeon of Horus, *Lucifer Rising* summarizes what came before in Anger’s cycle of films while presenting a more positive portrayal of the revolutionary spiritual renewal represented by the New Aeon. According to Bobby Beausoleil, originally cast as Lucifer in the film before his 1970 conviction for a Manson Family-related

72. Thompson, *Hell’s Angels*, 153–54.

73. Thompson, *Hell’s Angels*, 256.

murder (Beausoleil would go on to produce the film's second soundtrack, and footage of him would appear in Anger's 1969 *Invocation of My Demon Brother*), *Lucifer Rising* was meant to be the antithesis of *Scorpio*:

The idea for *Lucifer* was to be the antithesis of *Scorpio*, which was kind of a death-image type of thing... The concept was that I would be representing the coming of the new age... In a mythological sense, we have come through matriarchy, we have come through the mother goddess. We have come to patriarchy where the goddess is male. And the Aquarian Age is supposed to represent the age of the child. This was the character I was supposed to play.⁷⁴

Lucifer Rising, then, is essentially a literal depiction of the Thelemic aeonic cycle, the ritual invocation of Horus/Lucifer by the Magi and the explosive, apocalyptic passing of the old aeons in the ruins of Egypt featuring Myriam Gibril as Isis and Donald Cammell (whose father had known Crowley and written a positive biography on him) as Osiris. Following the eclipse of the old aeons and the advent of the Aeon of Horus, Lucifer appears in physical form toward the end of the film, and he turns to look directly at the camera, and at us.

Anger's original conception of the film, which went through many changes and years of turmoil, was to make it more of a companion piece to *Scorpio Rising*—"my answer to *Scorpio Rising*," according to Anger, "which was a death mirror held up to American Culture."⁷⁵ Hutchison suggests that the original version of the film would have been about the "'holy' war between the two ages, Piscean and Aquarian, as represented by the rebellious youth of the 1960s and the repressive and conservative older generation."⁷⁶ Prior to its completion, Anger suggested that there is a "dialectical relationship between the two films," *Scorpio* and *Lucifer*, and states that *Lucifer* was to be a film about "the love generation," and genuinely intended to be a ritual leading to the physical manifestation of

74. Landis, *Anger: The Unauthorized Biography*, 145. Beausoleil's comment is obviously influenced by Crowley's aeonic theory.

75. Anger, cited in Hutchison, *Kenneth Anger*, 178.

76. Hutchison, *Kenneth Anger*, 178.

Horus/Lucifer, a “birthday party for the Aquarian Age” or the New Aeon.⁷⁷ Anger reiterates his Thelemic philosophy in this statement, asserting that most of his films leading up to *Lucifer Rising* have contained “a figure or a moment . . . which is my ‘Lucifer’ moment”; the new film would be the culmination of this work, the appearance in physical form of Anger’s longtime deity.⁷⁸ However, it is also clear from this statement that his film was not itself intended to be the start of the Luciferian New Aeon, but a celebration of it—a birthday party, not the birth—as for Thelemites the start of the Aeon of Horus had already taken place, a reality that Anger, following in the footsteps of Crowley, had documented throughout his earlier films. Essentially, *Lucifer Rising* is Anger’s “religious” statement about this reality: “Lucifer is the Rebel Angel behind what’s happening in the world today. His message is that the ‘Key of Joy is Disobedience.’”⁷⁹

This quotation from Crowley’s neo-Gnostic poem “Hymn to Lucifer”—in which Lucifer’s assistance in releasing the first humans from the “imbecile perimeter” of the Garden of Eden through “Love and Knowledge” is considered a salvific act—is very suggestive of Anger’s use of Lucifer as a figure of Horus, erotically linked with youthful, working-class revolt.⁸⁰ Staid, authoritarian American middle-class culture is like the “sterile universe” of Eden; the force and fire of the rebels—homoerotic sailors, Thanatos-worshipping bikers, anti-war hippies, dropouts, misfits, queers, drug addicts, cultists, and all of the lumpen elements that Anger celebrates with libidinal verve throughout his films—physically manifests the Luciferian energy of the Aeon of Horus, shattering the Old Aeon through joyful disobedience. While not aligned with any one particular political ideology or project, Anger’s consistent reliance on eroticized working-class imagery and countercultural aesthetics does imply an intrinsic connection in his films between the New Aeon and political and

77. Hutchison, *Kenneth Anger*, 178–79.

78. Hutchison, *Kenneth Anger*, 179.

79. Hutchison, *Kenneth Anger*, 179.

80. For more on Crowley’s poem “Hymn to Lucifer,” see Nilsson, “Hymn to Lucifer,” 153–73.

social rebellion, a societal mirror of the metaphysical changes occurring on the cosmic, divine level. Again, as Crowley states, “man is but a map of the universe, and Society is but the same on a larger scale.”⁸¹

All of these elements of Anger’s work culminate in the climax of *Lucifer Rising*, in really the only subcultural image in a film that is otherwise more classically mythological: that of the beautiful, youthful rebel angel, the god Horus now in physical form, turning to gaze at the audience near the conclusion of the film—wearing, in the vein of Anger’s previous misfits, youthful rebels, and working-class heroes, a very contemporary satin baseball jacket (which could easily have been worn by Marlon Brando or James Dean in a classic Hollywood picture), the god’s name emblazoned on the back in rainbow lettering: *L-U-C-I-F-E-R*.⁸²

Conclusion

Why is it important to scrutinize Kenneth Anger’s imagery for its class origins? Ignoring the class matrix from which specific cultural formations and symbolism emerge, and the ways in which Anger eroticizes and fetishizes that symbolism, causes critics of Anger’s work to miss the historical, and thus the *aeonic*, context of his films. What is lost in a “cultural turn” analysis of a body of work like Anger’s is the ways in which an emerging class insurgency esoterically relates, for Anger, to the coming of Crowley’s revolutionary New Aeon: libidinal symptoms of the force and fire of the Aeon of Horus, the Crowned and Conquering Child.

81. Crowley, “Liber CXCIV.”

82. Thanks to the first anonymous reviewer of this paper for pointing out that Leslie Huggins, who was ultimately chosen by Anger for the role of Lucifer in *Lucifer Rising*, was in fact a working-class steel worker from Middlesbrough, an industrial town in the northeast of England, who had never acted before. Anger was apparently very smitten with the young man, reinforcing his erotic interest in young blue-collar men and his belief that their libidinal energy best represented the Aeon of Horus. See John Gwatney’s interview with artist Jann Haworth, who created the jacket.

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The Working-Class Magus: Class, Politics, and Occult Power in *John Constantine: Hellblazer*

Bob Cluness

robertcluness@gmail.com

Abstract

First published in 1988 by DC Comics, *John Constantine: Hellblazer* has been one of the most successful contemporary serial comics titles to have arisen out of the “British Invasion” of 1980s US comics. The titular character of the series, John Constantine, is a British working-class magician and occult detective who is depicted as one of the world’s most powerful occultists. A marked departure from previous depictions of occultism and magic in US comics, *Hellblazer*’s tales of occult wars, demons, non-human entities, and social realism are set in a gritty, realist world whose elements of gothic horror, noir, and nightmarish imagery provide a stark social and political commentary on class divisions in contemporary Britain, resulting from the fallout resulting from the neoliberal economic programmes of successive Conservative and “New Labour” governments.

In this article, I examine how esoteric ideas and occultism expressed in *Hellblazer* intersect with politics, class, and power from a UK perspective: from the political and class backgrounds of the character’s creator Alan Moore and writers such as Jamie Delano, and the series’ depictions of British class politics, to the ways occult practices of various practitioners in the series take on the dimensions of social class. I also examine the influence of *Hellblazer* and the magical persona and politics of Constantine on the contemporaneous UK occultural milieu, from its impact upon creator Alan Moore to its role as a magical inspiration for contemporary UK magicians.

Keywords: John Constantine; Hellblazer; magic; comics; Alan Moore

Introduction

John Constantine: Hellblazer has been one of the most successful contemporary serial comics titles to have arisen out of the “British Invasion” of the 1980s US comics industry.¹ Created by writer Alan Moore, John Constantine first appeared in the pages of *The Saga of the Swamp Thing* in 1985 before getting his own stand-alone serial, *Hellblazer*, in 1988. A departure from previous depictions of occultism and magic in mainstream comics, *Hellblazer*’s tales of magic, occult wars, and encounters with supernatural entities were set in a gritty, social realist world that combined elements of gothic horror and literary noir with stark social and political commentary on class divisions in contemporary Britain.

At the heart of *Hellblazer* is John Constantine, a British working-class magician and occult detective considered to be one of the world’s most powerful magicians. Described as a “fusion of counterculture and leftist politics,”² and a “drunken, foul-mouthed populist with angry socialist views and union sympathies,”³ Constantine’s anti-authoritarian persona made him mainstream comics’ occultural spokesperson for exploring the imposed horrors of the neoliberal economic programs of successive Conservative and “New Labour” governments of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

1. The “British Invasion” refers to a group of British comics writers (such as Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, Grant Morrison, Warren Ellis, Grant Ennis, Jamie Delano, and Peter Milligan) and artists (such as Dave Gibbons, Brendan McCarthy, Glenn Fabry, Steve Dillon, and Philip Bond) who were brought in to work for US mainstream comics, in particular DC comics and their subsidiary imprint Vertigo, from the mid-1980s to the 1990s. Gaining their reputation in revitalising legacy characters such as Swamp Thing, Animal Man, Black Orchid, and The Doom Patrol, as well as original works such as *Watchmen*, *Hellblazer*, and *The Invisibles*, their work broke away from mainstream superhero comics in their covering of adult themes, as well as experimenting with the medium’s form and content, through incorporating ideas from neorealism, the historical avant garde, and modernist literature. For more background information see Greg Carpenter, *The British Invasion: Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, Grant Morrison, and the Invention of the Comic Book Writer*; Ben Little, “2000 AD: Understanding the “British Invasion” of American Comics”; Chris Murray, “Signals from Airstrip One: The British Invasion of Mainstream American Comics.”

2. Ken Chen, “The Devil You Know.”

3. Marc DiPaolo, *War, Politics and Superheroes*, 174.

In this article, I examine the ways that contemporary esoteric currents and UK class politics intersect and inform each other within *Hellblazer's* narratives. The article begins with an overview of Constantine's initial development from *Swamp Thing* to *Hellblazer*, alongside an examination of *Hellblazer's* narrative themes and depictions of social realism within the sociopolitical context of late twentieth-century British society. There are three reasons for giving such an analysis at the beginning of a paper on occulture and comics. The first is to highlight how occultural aspects of horror and the gothic are politicised within *Hellblazer's* diegetic world. The second is to show how Constantine's personal ethics and worldview as a magician are informed by his working-class background as well as a formative left-anarchist political ideology. The third is to show that *Hellblazer's* aesthetic representations of magic and occultism take on the dimensions of social class in the way that the magical practices and worldviews of the series' characters are informed by their sociopolitical and ideological standpoints.

Despite not possessing an explicit, didactic programme of esoteric praxis, I argue that—through his class politics, as well as his material and cynical worldview on magic and society—Constantine embodies aspects of chaos magical practice, as well as continuing the tradition of communitarian-based practitioners of popular magic, or “cunning folk.” From here, the paper then looks at recent academic literature on comics and religion that argues for comics' ability to function as mystical texts that can transmit an array of religious, spiritual, and occult concepts, before I examine Constantine's influence as a magical persona or “tulpa” on contemporary occulture. Constantine's anti-authoritarian and iconoclastic mannerisms alongside his aura of working-class “menace,” I argue, have had a profound effect upon the magical life of creator Alan Moore, while also making him an attractive entity for magicians in developing an ethical approach to magic.

***Hellblazer's* Working-Class Views and Inhuman Horrors**

John Constantine was initially developed in 1985 by comics writer Alan Moore with artists Stephen Bissette and John Totleben, during their time working on

the DC Comics title *The Saga of the Swamp Thing*. Having made a name for himself as the creator of *Miracleman* (1982-1989) and *V for Vendetta* (1982-1989), Moore was at the forefront of the “British Invasion” of British writers and artists during this period who were headhunted from the UK to work for US comics publishers DC and Marvel. Moore envisaged Constantine as a “wide-boy occultist”—part Houdini, part con man, and part occult detective—drawing heavily from the literary history of the “occult detective” genre with characters such as Dr. Martin Hesselius, Richard Occult, Dr. Terrence Thirteen, Mandrake the Magician, the Spectre, Zatanna, Mister E, Baron Winters, and Dr. Steven Strange.⁴

But from the beginning, Constantine was presented as wholly different from previous representations of the archetype. In an interview with William Christensen and Mark Siefert, Moore described how the majority of literary occult detectives would come from middle- or upper-class backgrounds. In comparison, Moore wanted Constantine to be less refined and more working class in his roots and character:

I have an idea that most of the mystics in comics are generally older people, very austere, very proper, very middle class in a lot of ways. They are not at all functional on the street. It struck me that it might be interesting for once to do an almost blue-collar warlock. Somebody who was streetwise, working class, and from a different background than the standard run of comic book mystics. Constantine started to grow out of that.⁵

This desire to make Constantine British and working class in origin was inspired by Moore’s own identification with a British working-class background, which informed his worldview and anarchist politics.⁶ Moore’s initial script treatment of Constantine would also emphasise his distinctive likeness to UK musician

4. For more background information on the genre of the literary “occult detective” see Tony Simmons, “The Sum of His Parts”; Marilena Parlati, “Ghostly Traces, Occult Clues: Tales of Detection in Victorian and Edwardian Fiction.”

5. William A. Christensen and Mark Seifert, “The Unexplored Medium: Alan Moore speaks on what makes working as a comic writer so appealing.”

6. See Margaret Killjoy, *Mythmakers & Lawbreakers: Anarchist Writers on Fiction*, 41-58; Heidi McDonald, “A FOR ALAN, Pt. 1: The Alan Moore Interview”; Dez Vylenz, *The Mindscape of Alan Moore*.

Sting from British band the Police,⁷ in particular his performances in films such as *Quadrophenia* (1979) and its representation of working-class Mod subcultures.⁸ The result was the formulation of Constantine's defining stylistic motifs: his spiky blond hair, light brown mac raincoat and suit, "Silk Cut" brand cigarettes, his demotic working-class British accent (a mix of Estuary English and Liverpudlian), and a character that hinted at a "faint air of menace,"⁹ combined with a casual disregard for the niceties and conventions of other occult detectives.

The popularity of Constantine's appearances in *Swamp Thing* led to him being given his own series, *Hellblazer*, in September 1987. Due to prior writing commitments, Moore turned down the offer to write the early issues, recommending the position to his friend and fellow working-class writer Jamie Delano. While it was Moore who created John Constantine as a character, it would be Delano who would go on to develop *Hellblazer* and Constantine's textural universe. Readers are introduced to his bleak working-class roots and family in Liverpool, his occult development via the anarchist punk scene of the late '70s as a member of the band Mucous Membrane, and the infamous "Newcastle" episode in 1978, when a botched exorcism sends a young girl to Hell and damns Constantine, consigning him to two years as a patient at the Ravenscar mental asylum.

While Constantine is no stranger to astral realms, cosmic forces, or venturing into Hell to battle demons, his world in *Hellblazer* is far removed from that of mainstream superhero comics. The majority of the series takes place in a social realist milieu associated with working-class culture and communities: council housing estates, grotty bedsits, shabby seaside towns, football terraces, the pub, the corner shop, and the "greasy spoon" cafe. Outside of his family and close friend Chas, Constantine's social network includes people from working-class and

7. Christensen and Seifert, "The Unexplored Medium."

8. For more background on Mod and working-class subcultures, see Dick Hebdige, *Subculture; The Meaning of Style*; Ian Penman, "Even If You Have to Starve." An image/aesthetic comparison between Sting/Constantine can be found at <https://www.vulture.com/2014/10/secret-history-of-john-constantine.html>.

9. Elisabeth Sandifer, "Declare Yourself A Magician (The Last War in Albion Part 62: John Constantine)."

minoritarian communities, including anarchist punks and New Age travellers, the homeless, sex workers, and substance abusers. Yet despite the constrained conditions of their social situation, argues Marc DiPaolo, *Hellblazer* portrays everyday working-class people as being “beautiful on the inside, and more worthy of love and respect than any solicitor, clergyman, or prime minister.”¹⁰

For British magicians such as Ian “Cat” Vincent and Anthony Nine, what first drew them to Constantine was that the world depicted in *Hellblazer* resembled their own working-class backgrounds and the areas where they grew up (North Kent for Vincent, Newcastle for Nine). “What attracted me to *Hellblazer* was purely the fact that he was working class,” argues Vincent:

It was that simple. Up until that point, every occult detective figure in pop culture was middle or very upper class, going all the way back to John Silence. Steven (Dr) Strange is a multi-millionaire surgeon! And then you get John who was so refreshing to see – A lad from the nasty end of town who’s cheeky and who doesn’t give a toss about the formalities or niceties of ritual magic.¹¹

Hellblazer’s neorealist representations of contemporary Britain and magic also had an impact on occultist and writer Nine during his formative years in learning magic:

I had never seen where I was from being mythologized in that way or in that sort of context. Geordie representation in the 80s was like the comedy sidekick or a London TV script writer’s idea of what dim, amiable salt-of-the-earth working class people must be like. If Newcastle was ever mentioned in anything at all, it was always in this “know your place” sort of way . . . Constantine provided a template of someone from the same sort of background as me who moved in the same sort of world I knew, but who had through his own cunning and wits, learned how to make grimoire magic work in a way that also enabled him to move in the same world as *Swamp Thing*, *The Sandman*’s Morpheus, etc. For someone who grew up in the north under Thatcher and was just about to leave school into a blighted terrain of dole lines and recession, and had already started fucking around with magic, it was like a lighthouse of possibility.¹²

10. Marc DiPaolo, *War, Politics and Superheroes*, 174.

11. Cat Vincent, online interview, 7 December 2023.

12. Anthony Nine, E-mail interview, 3 January 2024.

Nine's comment about growing up in the North of England under the government of then-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher points to *Hellblazer's* other core narrative theme: a stringent left-wing political commentary on British society during the 1980s and '90s. The sociopolitical landscape of the UK during *Hellblazer's* inception in 1987 was that of a hard shift to the political right, fuelled by the dominance of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government. While in office, Thatcher would impose a socioeconomic program of neoliberal accumulation that included free-market liberalisation and deregulation, the rolling back of state intervention, the privatisation of state assets, the commodification of the public sector, and reduced taxation for the capitalist classes.¹³

This programme, argues Stuart Hall, sought to break "the power the working class had come to exercise in society, via the trade unions, in economic and political life."¹⁴ The "creative destruction" at the heart of Thatcher's neoliberal policies resulted in a "huge success from the standpoint of the upper classes" with "restored class power to the ruling elites."¹⁵ Meanwhile, newly established cultural values and practices would valorise petit bourgeois individualism, material and personal aspiration, and entrepreneurialism, embodied as part of an emergent "enterprise culture."¹⁶

For the working class, however, this led to the dismantling of essential services provided by the state, the selling off of nationalised industries associated with working-class labour (heavy industries, mining, manufacturing), and the withering of working-class communities connected to such industries. This situation is exemplified in Grant Morrison's two-part story "Early Warning" and "How I Learned to Love the Bomb" (*Hellblazer* #25-26, 1990), as the Northern town of Thorndyke is desperate to keep the jobs provided by the local military

13. Bob Jessop, "From Thatcherism to New Labour: Neoliberalism, Workfarism, and Labour Market Regulation," 139-40.

14. Stuart Hall, "The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism among the Theorists," 39.

15. David Harvey, "Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction," 152.

16. See Paul Heelas & P. Morris, eds., *The Values of the Enterprise Culture: The Moral Debate*.

base and nuclear power plant after the closure of the local mine: “Once upon a time, souls were traded for immortality or riches. Now we are bought and sold with the promise of jobs,” opines the local priest. “The human spirit is devalued currently. How the Devil must be laughing.”¹⁷

Delano and subsequent writers used *Hellblazer’s* narration box alongside the generic motifs of literary noir to present Constantine’s inner monologue as a running commentary on the realities of contemporary Britain during the 1980s and ‘90s. Through the occult eyes of Constantine, Britain is portrayed as a gothic hellhole—a grim place that, under the veneer of economic progress and aspiration, is steeped in cultural darkness, complete with visions of squalor and deprivation, nuclear armageddon, religious fundamentalism, neofascism, political violence, and repression by the state toward minoritarian groups.

Alongside this sociopolitical darkness, *Hellblazer’s* narratives are awash with graphic depictions of horror. Mirroring the “horrority” of contemporaneous body horror films such as David Cronenberg’s *Videodrome* (1983), *The Fly* (1986), John Carpenter’s *The Thing* (1982), and Brian Yuzna’s *Society* (1989), *Hellblazer* takes a vicious delight in the telling and showing of the destruction of human bodies by forces beyond their control.¹⁸ With Vertigo’s remit allowing for adult themes and content, artists such as Mark Buckingham, Steve Dillon, John Ridgeway, and William Simpson intensified the horror and gore, drawing graphic depictions of bloodied bodies being skinned, eviscerated, and torn to shreds, complete with gothic shading and garish colour schemes reminiscent of EC’s horror comics from the 1950s.

In one graphic example, the story “Extreme Prejudice” (*Hellblazer* #6, 1988) has the demon Nergal murdering and mutilating four skinheads before moulding their flesh into a four-bodied chimera named “Ironfist,” whom he sends to kill Constantine.¹⁹ Despite the monstrosity and gore, horror in *Hellblazer*—far from

17. Grant Morrison and David Lloyd (artist), “Early Warning,” 13.

18. See Philip Brophy, “Horrority—The Textuality of Contemporary Horror Film.”

19. An image of Nergal’s “Ironfist” can be found at <https://randomcrit.com/index.php/2021/01/28/hellblazer-vol-1-original-sins-review-la-magia-es-una-adiccion/>.

being a rejected cultural genre—becomes a powerful diagnosis of the inhuman monstrosity of neoliberal capitalism. Unlike some works of classic horror cinema or literature, the horror in *Hellblazer* denies both narrative closure and a return to the desired arrangements of the post-war consensus. Instead, the display of never-ending visceral horror as a political and ontological allegory represents a cultural response to the fate of the working class, the poor, and minoritarian groups under the ongoing conditions of Thatcherism.²⁰

Alongside monstrous demons that torture human souls and flesh, *Hellblazer* depicts the upper and capitalist classes that benefit from neoliberalism as similarly diabolic in nature. In Garth Ennis's tale "Royal Blood" (*Hellblazer* #52-55, 1992), Constantine uncovers a plot by shadowy aristocrats to instigate absolute rule by possessing Prince Charles with the demon Calibraxis, while the rich and powerful are depicted as revelling in deviant behaviour such as drugs, S&M, torture, incest, and murder. Meanwhile in Delano's "Going for It" (*Hellblazer* #3, 1988), on the eve of the 1987 UK general election, demons pose as financially upmarket "yuppies" seeking to gentrify a working-class neighbourhood. Embodying Thatcherism's spirit of enterprise culture, the demons capitalise on the upsurge in greed to trade souls as commodities on a stock exchange in Hell, with one demon speculating that Thatcher's re-election represents "a platinum opportunity to corner the UK market."²¹ Thatcher herself is portrayed as appropriately demonic, with Dave McKean's front cover depicting her with demonic eyes and vampire teeth alongside the message "VOTING TORY CAN DAMAGE YOUR HEALTH."²² In one scene, the demons string Constantine upside down and force him to watch Thatcher give a speech on TV during the election returns:

20. For more background on the relationship between horror genres, aesthetics, and capitalism, see Steve Shaviro, "Capitalist Monsters"; David McNally, *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism*; Jon Greenaway, *Capitalism, a Horror Story: Gothic Marxism and the Dark Side of the Radical Imagination*.

21. Jamie Delano and John Ridgeway (artist), "Going for It," 7.

22. An image of the cover can be viewed at <http://www.insanerantings.com/hell/gallery/hb3.html>.

THATCHER: I intend to win this election and go on and on. My government will provide the freedom for private enterprise to flourish—to create wealth, so that we can afford to care for the sick and disadvantaged.

CONSTANTINE: Jesus, damned to the “help yourself society”—where the strong help themselves to whatever they want and the weak are left to help themselves. . . .

THATCHER: With our guidance, Britain will be great again, a nation of growth and opportunity — a symbol of strength.

CONSTANTINE: Isn't she marvellous?²³

Constantine manages to outsmart the yuppie demons, sending them back to Hell (in one panel stating, “I may always’ve been a peasant—but at least I’m a *clever* peasant!”),²⁴ but the victory is pyrrhic as Thatcher is shown to have won the 1987 general election with a massive majority. Constantine ends the issue ruefully brooding over the result, “like I said, there’s more than one road to hell.”²⁵ While Constantine is able to score a victory against the legions of Hell, he is rendered powerless against the more (in)human and unstoppable horrors of Thatcherism.

Alongside neoliberal policies, Thatcherism in the 1980s and ‘90s commenced what Bob Jessop calls “a distinctive ‘two nations’ authoritarian populist hegemonic project” that interpreted UK society as an antagonistic binary between “productive” citizens and “parasitic” subordinate groups undermining the productive work of the nation.²⁶ This led to a series of moral panics in right-wing media against the perceived “enemy within” British society that included “radical trade unionists, left-wing intellectuals, the bureaucratic welfare state, liberal “permissive” teachers and parents, homosexuals, the HIV positive, immigrants, the unemployed, welfare recipients, criminals.”²⁷ The result was

23. Delano and Ridgeway, “Going for It,” 20. An image of the panel can be viewed at https://www.reddit.com/r/comicbooks/comments/mn1jut/excerpt_anyone_else_miss_the_80s_when_writers/.

24. Delano and Ridgeway, “Going for It,” 21.

25. Delano and Ridgeway, “Going for It,” 24.

26. Jessop, “From Thatcherism to New Labour,” 139.

27. Fuchs, “Neoliberalism in Britain: From Thatcherism to Cameronism,” 166.

the imposition of a repressive state apparatus that not only criminalised organised working-class power, industrial action, and protest, but also sought to criminalise minoritarian and alternative social groups within British society.²⁸

Thatcher's repressive police state and 1980s occulture would collide in the *Hellblazer* story arc "The Fear Machine" (*Hellblazer*#14-22, 1989-1990) as Constantine and a group of neopagan "New Age" travellers attempt to stop rogue Freemasons and clandestine police snatch squads from using a psychic weapon to unleash the dragon god Jallakuntilliokan. Defeating the masculine Jallakuntilliokan dragon through a ritual of sex magic to bring forth the power of the divine feminine, "The Fear Machine" is a particularly salient example of *Hellblazer's* weaving of contemporaneous occultural and political issues—where earth mysteries, geomancy, neopagan magic, Cold War remote viewing, and psychic warfare sit alongside police brutality and corruption towards the 1980s "Peace Convoy" of New Age traveller communities, free-party anarchists, and alternative spiritual groups.²⁹

During *Hellblazer's* run, several writers would explore a variety of contemporary political issues airing from the social and economic inequality of neoliberalism, from the second war in Iraq ("Pandemonium"), neofascism and religious fundamentalism ("Fear and Loathing," "Highwater"), and colonialism ("Dreamtime," "India"), to the legacy of dirty politics during the UK strikes of the 1980s ("Scab"). While the writer/artist partnerships and subsequent narratives skewed towards a UK-centric view of politics, *Hellblazer* would also go on to explore the ramifications of neoliberal expansion across the American sociocultural landscape. In "Damnation's Flame" (*Hellblazer* #72-

28. See Seamus Milne, *The Enemy Within: The Secret War Against the Miners*; Andrew Taylor, *What about the Workers?*, 198-230; Sue Wise "'New Right' or 'Backlash'?" Section 28, Moral Panic and 'Promoting Homosexuality'; Simon Peplow, *Race and Riots in Thatcher's Britain*.

29. For more background on the occultural and political dimensions of the "The Peace Convoy" and New Age travellers in general, see Christopher Partridge, "The Spiritual and the Revolutionary"; Kevin Hetherington, *New Age Travellers*; David Christopher, "Mean Fields." For background on magical and neopagan political action in the UK in the 1980s, see Shai Ferraro, "Playing The Pipes of PAN: Pagans Against Nukes and the Linking of Wiccan-Derived Paganism with Ecofeminism in Britain, 1980-1990."

75), Constantine is guided by the corpse of John F. Kennedy across a nightmarish vision of Hell depicted as the US, ruled by “Abe Lincoln” aka the Devil himself. Meanwhile, US writer Brian Azzarello’s tenure saw him move *Hellblazer* and the socio-political action to the US. Here, Constantine would embark on a noir journey across the nation where, in a similar fashion to his exploration of British social mores, he experiences the US prison-industrial complex, neo-Nazi militia groups, and small-town deprivation driven by the machinations of powerful, corrupt billionaires.

Class-Based Magical Practice in *Hellblazer*

The diegetic world of *Hellblazer* is one where physical reality can be manipulated by an array of practices that are magical in nature. As such, *Hellblazer* contains a multitude of characters across all social strata who are practitioners of magic. But while the majority of characters practise magic that generally conforms with Bernd Christian Otto’s semantic model of “ritual,” “power,” “miracle,” and “wish-fulfilment,”³⁰ their use of and relationship to magic is also contingent on their social standing and class. In *Hellblazer*, magical practitioners from the upper and capitalist classes are shown to use magic not only to consolidate their material position but also to acquire more power by controlling material reality, amplifying their authority, or acquiring knowledge that will give them a competitive advantage.

This worldview is embodied in the character of Lord Calvin Burnham, a real-estate mogul and member of the aristocracy who uses magic to further his material ambitions and consolidate his power at the expense of the lower classes. In the story “Joyride” (*Hellblazer* #234-237, 2007), his use of magic instigates a wave of violence, murder, and mass suicide on the Hunger Hill housing estate, ensuring that his real estate company can profit off its demolition and subsequent redevelopment. Whether through the acquisition of powerful magical tools or his use of magicians from the global South of Africa and India, Lord Burnham’s use of occult power is contingent upon class wealth, imperialism, and colonialism.

30. Bernd-Christian Otto, “Magic,” 2; Cf. Wouter Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 102-18.

In comparison, Constantine's magical abilities seem underpowered, almost quotidian in nature. Constantine is shown to be a "jack of all trades" magician who applies various magical systems and techniques—from grimoires, ceremonial magic, and sigilisation to Tantra, divination, and pathworking. But while he is versed in such techniques, he shows little regard for adhering to the formal aspects of ritual magic or even for the agency and power placed on specific (and often expensive) tools and props. While Constantine does practice magic for short-term material gain in a manner that constitutes an ethically grey area (such as getting free flights, winning via gambling, or using sleight of hand to steal an object or money), such practices are often done out of material necessity and are rarely done purely for selfish pleasure or for "power" over people or social groups.

When it comes to his views on practicing magic, Constantine provides several definitions and opinions on what magic is—or, in some cases, isn't. In one scene, he states, "there's no such thing as magic—not real magic anyway. Magic's just when you trick the universe into believing some incredibly outrageous lie."³¹ In another moment, Constantine states: "People think magic's a way of transforming reality—but in the end, you find that all that you've really changed is yourself. Which probably explains why every magician I've ever met's a self-absorbed asshole. Still, first rule of magic: perception is reality."³² In another scene (while the police are breaking down his door in the middle of the night), he muses, "First rule of magic: when you're right up shit creek—when it's a matter of life an' death—when you really need it to work—it won't."³³

From the above quotes, Constantine's views on the real nature of magic often go against those who assign lofty aspirations and metaphysical claims to magic's ability to transform nature, or indeed the individual. For Constantine, magic is real, but it is merely a means to an end. Often magic, for Constantine, is a bit of a joke, a con put out to bamboozle the credulous and is therefore not to be taken

31. Paul Jenkins and Sean Phillips (artist), "Sins of the Father," 1.

32. Andy Diggle and Leonardo Manco (artist), "Wheels of Chance, Systems of Control," 3.

33. Garth Ennis and John Higgins (artist), "Son of Man: Part One," 7

seriously. As Constantine argues, “perception is reality”; it is less about adherence to the structure of a particular system or the capital-intensive process of acquiring the right tools or texts. Instead, magic is placed in the realm of everyday spaces and objects, where a paper cup becomes a chalice, a cigarette acts as a wand. What matters is possessing the right attitude and will towards ritual or magical practice.

This is fortunate, for in multiple instances Constantine is forced to perform magic under extreme conditions, relying on his belief and self-confidence rather than adhering to rigid ritual formalities. This is evident in “Going for It” when Constantine summons a demon while lacking the appropriate ritual tools to do so (“Half my bloody magick kit is either lost or borrowed and there’s no time to prepare myself properly”³⁴), yet his ritual still works for as he points out, “all you really need are the right contacts and a bit of nerve.”³⁵

Although there is no single unifying system in Constantine’s use of magic, his attitudes and practices regarding occultism and magic align in several places with those of chaos magic. Emerging in the UK in the late 1970s, chaos magic is a meta-model of magic whose core tenet is that belief itself is a tool rather than the endpoint in magical or ritual practice. For chaos magicians (or chaotes), it is the efficacy of the practices used that matters most, alongside a willingness to use whatever traditions, models, or systems of magic deemed as appropriate. As such, chaos magic is associated with a radical individualism and relativism towards belief systems, embodying what Colin Duggan calls a “perennial iconoclasm,” wherein chaotes are open to exploring all avenues of esoteric knowledge through experimentation, play, and creativity, while at the same time disregarding and attacking established traditions, conventions, and institutions associated with magic and mainstream society.³⁶

Constantine’s magical worldview can be compared to chaos magic in three ways. The first is biographical and associative, in that both Constantine and chaos

34. Delano and Ridgeway, “Going for It,” 15.

35. Delano and Ridgeway, “Going for It,” 15.

36. Colin Duggan, “Perennialism and Iconoclasm,” 97-100.

magic occupy the same shared countercultural origins, namely the anarchist punk and squat scene of mid-to-late 1970s London.³⁷ Indeed, according to Christian Greer, chaos magic, anarcho-punk, and anarchist discourse (through individuals such as Moore) are components of a wider “chaos discourse”—a sprawling constellation of ideas and subcultural movements in the late twentieth century that agitated for the invoking of ontological and “metaphysical chaos” through the proliferation of underground zines and comics.³⁸

The second comparison is how both wilfully use a variety of magical systems and techniques rather than being tied down to any one tradition. For Constantine (and the chaote), it is not the value placed in specific tools, systems, or deities that makes magic work, but rather the level of applied will and belief in their application. The third association is the way in which Constantine embodies the “perennial iconoclasm” inherent in chaos magic through his stringent anti-authoritarianism and blatant disregard for established tradition or dogma. Whether it be an angel or demon, magician or government minister, to Constantine the class hierarchies of British society and the hierarchies of heaven and hell are effectively the same system of power and privilege.

A prime example is found in “R.S.V.P. Part 2” (*Hellblazer* #245, 2008) where Constantine, seeking to sever his links with the occult scene, gives a speech to the magicians of London’s Tate Club, whereupon he castigates them for their selfishness and arrogance before burning the club to the ground. Meanwhile, in a scene in “Dangerous Habits,” Constantine, dying from terminal lung cancer, expresses his feelings and ire towards hierarchical power and the ruling classes:

37. One of the emergent currents of chaos magic in the UK was the anarchist and squat scene in mid to late ‘70s London where, as part of the “Stoke Newington Sorcerers” group, members who would go on to develop chaos magic became “entwined in the nascent anarchy of the explosion of ‘Punk’ fashion” (Frater Choronzon, “Crisis Magicians, Orders, Disorders, Lynx, and Lone Wolves”). See also Jaq D. Hawkins, *The Chaonomicon*, Kindle position 169-99; Peter J. Carroll, *Interview with a Wizard*, 159, 205.

38. See Christian Greer, “Zines,” and *Angel-Headed Hipsters: Psychedelic Militancy in Nineteen-Eighties North America*.

I want you to know that it was always about you. Not the magic or the demons, or anything. Your power's just like magic cos it doesn't exist unless enough people believe in it. In a way that's what I've been fighting all these years. Just belief.

All I ever wanted was for the world to be free of your kind, whether you were here in Parliament or in senate or junta or Hell or Heaven. Maybe that's pointless, then. Maybe the people are too small and scared to be free. Maybe they want you there, shitting all over them. But like a salesman who's only too eager to sew up his market and stitch up his customers, you're happy enough to exploit that. Aw, sod it. Sod you. For whatever it's worth, you were always the enemy.³⁹

Aside from correlations between Constantine's magical practice and chaos magic, Anthony Nine and scholar Genevieve Williams also place Constantine within the tradition of "cunning folk," or practitioners of popular magic in the UK and Europe from the eleventh to eighteenth centuries.⁴⁰ Cunning folk had knowledge of, and practiced, a myriad of techniques cobbled together from various sources—made available either through supernatural or hereditary powers (e.g., communing with familiars, fairies, ghosts, or angels), from familial knowledge, or via reading acquired books and texts.⁴¹ Through their comparatively elevated education, cunning folk were considered experts who straddled the worlds of learned "high" magic and folk "low" magic, offering "a complete package of magical and medical services" that included love magic, curse placing, treasure finding, locating stolen items or the thieves, protection against or combating witchcraft, healing from various ailments, and fortune telling.⁴²

Despite the apparent popularity of common magic and the social importance of cunning folk in early modern Britain until the nineteenth century, contemporary historical research has largely neglected placing them within the

39. Garth Ennis and Will Simpson (artist), "My Way: Dangerous Habits Part 4," 14.

40. Genevieve Williams, "Ghosts, Grimoires, and Dealing with Demons," 224; Anthony Nine, e-mail interview, 3 January 2024.

41. See Owen Davies, *Popular Magic*, VII-VIII; Catherine Rider, "Common Magic."

42. Owen Davies, *The Oxford Illustrated History of Witchcraft and Magic*, 191.

corresponding sociocultural history.⁴³ Unlike “high” magic practitioners who wrote and published their ideas on magic and esoteric philosophy, the practices of cunning folk were rarely recorded or written down, transmitted instead through familial oral tradition or through the folk knowledge of the community.⁴⁴ As such, the practices of cunning folk and popular magic appear as a marginalised and fragmented tradition. Despite such discontinuities, for Nine, the tradition of the cunning folk and popular magic embodied by Constantine still exists to this day, through both British folk culture and the modern occult revival:

If there is a tradition of “English Magic” then it’s this under-the-counter, shapeshifting impulse, moved by need that wells up in the marginal fissures of a country and culture that doesn’t believe in it and is collectively “ghosting it”—so to speak. It’s the way in which magic continues to exist at the edges of a host culture that has otherwise tried to eradicate it . . . Magic never really goes away though. There’s never a year when there aren’t any magicians born. But in England, it’s like a fractured tradition that reinvents itself periodically, not any sort of intact lineage, consistent set of practices or clearly defined belief system. It is as much the Juggler as it is the Magus, and it thrives in disreputable spaces. The fortune teller’s booth and the gambling den, the seaside pier and the shebeen, the pub and the betting shop.⁴⁵

In his use of a wide and varied assemblage of magical techniques, Constantine embodies the bricolage approach of the cunning folk. Neither Constantine nor cunning folk are interested in developing complex systems of occult practice aimed at achieving spiritual evolution or attaining divine knowledge, but are instead concerned with more quotidian matters, applying “practical magical solutions” to resolve everyday problems—from the alleviation of ailments to the obtainment of resolutions to social problems.⁴⁶ Their remit is to help and look after people in a harsh, occult world teeming with “invisible supernatural entities which constantly influenced the natural world and the lives of men.”⁴⁷

43. See Davies, *Popular Magic*, XIII–XIV, and “Cunning-Folk in England and Wales During the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries”; Willem de Blécourt, “Witch Doctors.”

44. Davies, *Popular Magic*, XIII.

45. Anthony Nine, email interview, 3 January 2024.

46. Davies, *Popular Magic*, XIII.

47. Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, 8.

Despite being a clearly fallible human character with a murky system of ethics, Constantine, in his role as occult detective and problem solver, is overall a compassionate humanist concerned with trying to do good by those within his local community, and helping various members of the public with all manner of problems, be it material or spiritual. And like the cunning folk, the services he provides can range from high-stakes magic (such as driving out a demon or vengeful spirit) to acquiring justice for people through more material measures such as confidence tricks, deception, or bringing in criminal elements. The tradition of cunning folk in *Hellblazer* is not only embodied by Constantine alone, for we are introduced in multiple storylines to a diverse subculture of working-class cunning folk, witches, and psychics who are friends and occasional allies, such as Angie Spatchcock, Nigel Archer, and the child psychic Mercury.

However, while many cunning folk were popular and respected in early modern British society, in order to offer their services they “had to be some sort of outsider,”⁴⁸ ensuring that, while they were part of the community, they were not of it. For Constantine, this situation is underscored by the hazardous nature of his role as a magician and occult detective dealing with occult forces, where he is often forced to make hard choices of staggeringly cosmic proportions of life and death. Like the cunning folk, Constantine is often portrayed in *Hellblazer* as a “lone wolf” character with a “sinister” reputation, whose use of magic and willingness to do what is deemed cosmically necessary sets him apart from his friends and the community. “Fucking magic, see?” rues Constantine; “the price is always higher than the prize.”⁴⁹

48. Willem de Blécourt, “Witch Doctors,” 298.

49. Si Spurrier and Aaron Campbell, “This Sceptred Isle, Part Two,” 160.

Comics as Spiritual Texts and the Influence of *Hellblazer* and Constantine in the Occultural Milieu

Despite being a “rejected genre” of popular culture,⁵⁰ comics have enjoyed enormous success across all levels of publishing and production—from cross-platform multi-billion-dollar superhero franchises to countercultural and “zine” comix. As a result, comics, according to Kennet Granholm, are “popular cultural products where the occult is most prominent as well as one of the few remaining popular cultural arenas where creators are still relatively free to experiment with unorthodox subject matter.”⁵¹ The particular effectiveness of comics in conveying spiritual and occult concepts, argue Hoff Kraemer and A. David Lewis, is due to (a) their accessibility in conveying signs and imagery with text, and (b) the ability to instantiate powerful emotional engagement, resulting in an intense aesthetic response and meaning on the part of the reader, due to (c), the immersive participatory experience associated with comics.⁵²

It is this unique ability to transmit occult and spiritual concepts that has led some scholars to argue that comics (in particular superhero comics) are not only ideally suited to representing religious, spiritual, and esoteric concepts, but can function as a “modern mythology”—directing and shaping spiritual and esoteric phenomena as “gnostic or esoterically-encoded mythical, mystical texts.”⁵³ This proposition has been notably, and audaciously, forwarded by Jeffrey Kripal in his book *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal*, where he argues not only for comics’ representational relationship with esoteric

50. Jeffrey Kripal, “Can Superhero Comics Really Transmit Esoteric Knowledge?” 179.

51. Kennet Granholm, “Comics and the Occult,” 499.

52. Christine Hoff Kraemer and A. David Lewis, “Comics/Graphic Novels,” 211-12.

53. David M. Odoriso, “A New Gnosis: The Comic Book as Mythical Text,” 5. Recent literature on the relationship between comics and their representation of the religious, spiritual, and occult include David M. Odoriso, ed., *A New Gnosis: Comic Books, Comparative Mythology, and Depth Psychology*; A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kramer, *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books & Graphic Novels*; Assaf Gamzou and Ken Koltun-Fromm, eds., *Comics and Sacred Texts: Reimagining Religion and Graphic Narratives*; Chris Linsner Knowles and Joseph Michael, *Our Gods Wear Spandex: The Secret History of Comic Book Heroes*.

ideas and traditions, but that also comics embody a mythological “super-story” in the form of a meaningful and sacred “Meta-myth, a deep, often unconscious narrative that underlies and shapes much of contemporary popular culture.”⁵⁴

For Kripal, what is so powerful about the “super-story” and its evolution through comics is its dynamic, participatory nature. Not only do some authors come to the realisation that they are caught in the constructed reality of the “super-story” and that we are being “written” by occult and paranormal forces, but through comics, the writer (and reader) can become an active participant in said “super story,” thereby “writing the paranormal writing us.”⁵⁵

The use of comics as a tool for esoteric praxis has been most associated with the work of two authors—Grant Morrison and Alan Moore.⁵⁶ Moore’s best-known titles, such as *V for Vendetta* (1982), *Watchmen* (1986–1987), and *From Hell* (1989–1998), contain overtly political narratives and themes that reflect Moore’s anarchist sensibilities, developed through his interest in countercultural art and comics.⁵⁷ But Moore was already exploring esoteric and spiritual concepts—from the “holistic ecotheology” in *Swamp Thing* (1984–1987)⁵⁸ to Freemasonry, Victorian occultism, and modern esoteric traditions in *From Hell*.⁵⁹ This immersion culminated on Moore’s 40th birthday in 1993, when he “declared himself completely mad,” and came out as a ceremonial magician who worshipped a Roman snake god called Glycon.⁶⁰

As a magician, Moore would synthesise various esoteric traditions with his ideas

54. Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 5.

55. Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 254.

56. While an analysis of Grant Morrison’s relationship with comics and occultism is outside of the scope of this essay, for an analysis see Granholm, “Comics and the Occult,” 503–5; Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 8–16; Megan Goodwin “Conversion to Narrative: Magic as Religious Language in Grant Morrison’s *Invisibles*”; Timothy Bavinka, *Superheroes and Shamanism*.

57. Killjoy, *Mythmakers and Lawbreakers*, 55.

58. Granholm, “The Occult and Comics,” 502.

59. Eddie Campbell and Alan Moore, *Alan Moore: A Disease of Language*, 110–12. Emily Taylor Merriman, “London (and the Mind) as Sacred-Desecrated Place in Alan Moore’s *From Hell*.”

60. See Jay Babcock, “Magic Is Afoot.”

on magic, art, and language through a series of poetry and musical performances as ritual workings, such as *The Birth Caul* (1994) and *Snakes and Ladders* (1999).⁶¹ Meanwhile, Moore's conscious shift to magic began to intersect with his political views; in one interview he declared organised religion to be the spiritual equivalent of fascism, while magic is the spiritual embodiment of anarchism, in the way it "is purely about self-determination, with the magician simply a human being writ large, and in more dramatic terms, standing at the center of his or her own universe."⁶²

Moore's esoteric philosophy also began to explicitly inform his comics writing, at one point stating that through comics' hybrid integration of image and text, "you can perhaps convey the essence of the mystical experience in quite a direct and visceral way that might not be as easy to reproduce in any other medium."⁶³ This is observed in his long-running esoteric work *Promethea* (1995-2005), which, in its exploration of Western esoteric traditions such as Kabbalah, Tarot, and Thelema, sought to act as a didactic vehicle for transmitting spiritual and esoteric ideas to the reader, in the hope of initiating a gnostic shift in their consciousness.⁶⁴

For Moore, the writing and reading of comics become inherently magical acts that, through the medium of imagination, allow us to embark on a "purposeful engagement with the phenomena and possibilities of consciousness."⁶⁵ This interaction between consciousness and the ideas that emerge from it are represented by what Moore calls *Ideaspace*—a metaphysical landscape where, in a similar manner to the Jungian collective unconscious, all our ideas, philosophies, and archetypes exist.⁶⁶ Because Ideaspace is a psychical landscape that connects and

61. Both these events were subsequently adapted into graphic novels. See Eddie Campbell and Alan Moore, *The Birth Caul* (1999); *Snakes and Ladders* (2001). Both graphic novels were republished in the collected edition, Eddie Campbell and Alan Moore, *A Disease of Language* (2005).

62. Killjoy, *Mythmakers and Lawbreakers*, 55.

63. Steve Moore, "Writing as a Magical Act: An Interview with Alan Moore by Steve Moore," 9.

64. See Wouter Hanegraaff, "Alan Moore's Promethea"; Christine Hoff Kraemer and A. David Lewis, *Graven Images*, 274-91.

65. Sam Proctor, "Alan Moore: The Art of Magic."

66. For a more in-depth discussion on the concept of Ideaspace, see Moore and Campbell, *A Disease of Language*, 127-31.

overlaps with our consciousnesses, ideas and concepts can be discovered by more than one person in any given place or time. And if more than one person engages with Ideospace through the magical practice of writing and art, then particular ideas can rise out of Ideospace and take root in our material world and culture.

John Constantine: An Anarchist, Working-Class Tulpa

The practice of transmitting ideas and archetypes from the imaginal world of Ideospace to the material realm via the writing and reading of comics becomes especially notable when considering the impact of John Constantine and *Hellblazer* on writers, artists, and readers. Writers such as Delano, Peter Milligan, Paul Jenkins, and Brian Azzarello, for example, have all claimed to have physically encountered Constantine during their stints writing on *Hellblazer*.⁶⁷ While he took no part in writing *Hellblazer*, the “creation” of Constantine has had a profound effect on Moore’s life, even before his coming out as a magician. In his interview with Christensen and Siefert, Moore describes an actual physical encounter with “John Constantine” soon after he started writing him to appear in *Swamp Thing*:

One day, I was in Westminster in London—this was after we had introduced the character—and I was sitting in a sandwich bar. All of a sudden, up the stairs came John Constantine. He was wearing the trench coat, a short cut—he looked—no, he didn’t even look exactly like Sting. He looked exactly like John Constantine. He looked at me, stared me straight in the eyes, smiled, nodded almost conspiratorially, and then just walked off around the corner to the other part of the snack bar. I sat there and thought, should I go around that corner and see if he is really there, or should I just eat my sandwich and leave? I opted for the latter; I thought it was the safest. I’m not making any claims to anything. I’m just saying that it happened.⁶⁸

While it could be dismissed as an uncanny experience of meeting a lookalike, Constantine would reappear to Moore a second time at an undeclared moment

67. See Dejan Ognjanović, “Jamie Delano interview (1)”; Abraham Riesman, “The Secret History and Uncertain Future of Comics Character John Constantine.”

68. Christensen and Siefert, “The Unexplored Medium.”

during the 1990s, where he appeared out of the darkness, imparting upon Moore the following comment: “I’ll tell you the ultimate secret of magic. Any cunt could do it.”⁶⁹ In a subsequent interview, Moore provided more contextual detail, with Constantine appearing after a ritual working conducted with friends, while also pointing out that Constantine appeared *independently* outside of the ritual invocation itself:

I’d just stepped out of the room and popped downstairs to make some tea . . . and I was just passing through the kitchen when all of a sudden in the darkness on the left side of my head . . . It’s very difficult to describe this, but it was clearly that somebody had struck a match in the darkness, and this lit up the face of John Constantine in the sudden halo of the match flare. And he, in a typically amusing way, told me the ultimate secret of magic, very memorably, in one very short five-word sentence, and then blew the match out and vanished.⁷⁰

From his roots as a concept that impressed himself upon the fictional world of *Swamp Thing* to his growth and popularity in the pages of *Hellblazer*, Constantine’s subsequent manifestations before Moore and other writers show him acquiring autonomy outside of the minds of his creators. In this respect, Constantine can be said to have taken on the form of a *tulpa* or “thought-form”—an entity that “begins in the imagination but acquires a tangible reality and sentience.”⁷¹ While the tulpa has its roots in Buddhist mysticism, Taoism, and the native pre-Buddhist Bön shamanic tradition, it became syncretised through Theosophical discourses on “thought-forms” before being integrated with online phenomena such as the Slenderman.⁷² Taking Moore’s ideas on magic and Ideospace seriously, it is Moore’s and others’ collective act of writing Constantine that imbues him with what Erik Davis terms an “invasive exteriority,”⁷³ as he evolves from being a fictional entity to an actualised magical construct, able to impart his will and influence on the material realm.

69. Moore and Campbell, *A Disease of Language*, 90.

70. Moore, quoted in Sandifer, “Declare Yourself a Magician.”

71. Natasha L. Mikles and Joseph P. Laycock, “Tracking the Tulpa,” 87.

72. Mikles and Laycock, “Tracking the Tulpa,” 93–4. For more on the phenomenon of tulpamancers, see Nathan Thompson, “Meet the ‘Tulpamancers’”; For more on the Slenderman phenomenon, see Cat Vincent, “Slenderman: Tracing the Birth and Evolution of a Modern Monster.”

73. Erik Davis, *High Weirdness (Kindle Edition)*, Location 5853.

The notion of Constantine—with his anarchistic iconoclasm, working-class menace, and punk attitude to magic—being able to exist as a “thought form” would prove attractive to magicians within the occult milieu of the 1990s and 2000s. Online discussion forums such as the alt.magick Usenet forum would recommend *Hellblazer* for novice magicians while also discussing the use of Constantine as a character model for the practice of magic. Members of the Z(Cluster) online chaos magic community would talk of “becoming” Constantine during psychedelic rituals,⁷⁴ while others described manifesting Constantine as a servitor in magical rituals, arguing that he made “an excellent servitor” due to the fact that “energy is resident in characters which evoke emotional response or admiration from those who read the stories.”⁷⁵

Meanwhile, Cat Vincent has worked with Constantine as a magical thought-form in several ritual workings since the late 1990s. “He is that easy to summon,” notes Vincent; “The only trick, the only safety precaution you need to make when working with John Constantine as a Loa is *never call him your friend*. Then you’re fucked.”⁷⁶ One such notable working was in February 2014, during the theatre adaptation of Robert Anton Wilson’s discordian opus *Cosmic Trigger* in Liverpool. After a preview viewing, members of the cast and crew performed a series of impromptu rituals in front of a bust of Carl Jung, which included a working by Vincent to invoke Constantine as “a son of Liverpool” and “a master of the Caper.”⁷⁷ In his review of the production, Vincent describes the ritual thus:

Daisy introduced me to the group, and I essayed a short ceremony, calling upon John Constantine’s synchronicity-surfing powers and his cunning (and, very specifically, not

74. Riff “riffraff” to zee-list@eskimo.com, 11 Jun 1997, ZD 97 (No. 93). Z(Cluster) archive available from https://www.reddit.com/r/zcluster/comments/2ga115/zeequinox_volume_i_19962000_yes_its_encrypted_and/

75. Josh “Culculus” to zee-list@eskimo.com, 13 Jun 1997, ZD 97 (No. 97).

76. Cat Vincent, online interview, 12 Dec 2023.

77. Cat Vincent, “Reviewing: Pulling the Cosmic Trigger.” A video of the ritual can be observed at Complexity Ltd, “Cosmic Trigger – The Jung Person’s Guide to Liverpool,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RBD06b1trAY>.

his friendship) for all assembled there, with a ceremonial offering of a shared flask of single malt and a pack of Silk Cut, Constantine’s preferred smoke. Then Daisy spoke: calling on that same current which had called Jung’s soul to the Pool Of Life to bring the Cosmic Trigger to be pulled with the fullest effect, and to manifest that same spirit of destiny which had brought her so far . . . but, as she put it, only “just enough!”. The knickers were placed with the assistance of a rapidly constructed human pyramid (but of course), and we all cheered.⁷⁸

To Vincent, the workings were successful as not only did a member of the public promptly turn up wearing a football shirt with the number “23,” but a person in a light brown trench coat resembling Constantine turned up in the audience for a performance of *Cosmic Trigger* two days later.⁷⁹

Conclusion

In this essay, I have analysed how *Hellblazer’s* representations of occultism and magic—through the adoption of the generic strategies of horror and noir combined with social realism by Moore, Delano, and others—have generated powerful aesthetic allegories that critique political and social currents in the UK and US during the late twentieth century. Meanwhile, the anti-authoritarianism, cunning, and sarcasm of central protagonist John Constantine embody the intersection of power, class, and magic from a British working-class perspective—his background, culture, and interests informing his contempt for class hierarchies alongside a concern for the socially marginalised. Constantine’s approach and attitudes towards magic and occultism make him an attractive persona to conduct magic with, while providing inspiration as an ethical template for working-class magicians.”

While *Hellblazer* provided a platform for working-class and left-wing British writers to disseminate contemporary politics from an occult standpoint, in a twenty-first century where Thatcher is long gone and comics have become

78. Vincent, “Pulling the Cosmic Trigger.”

79. Vincent, “Pulling the Cosmic Trigger.”

part of mainstream culture, there are those who wonder if there is still a place for Constantine's oppositional occult worldview. In issue #7 of Warren Ellis's superhero series *Planetary*, the plot focuses on the funeral and murder investigation of Jack Carter, a conman magician and thinly veiled analogue of Constantine, who is revealed to have faked his own death. Ellis uses the narrative and metaphor of the funeral to critique both Constantine and the worldview of the British Invasion of US comics as a product, and relic, of 1980s politics. "The eighties are long over," Carter announces as he erases his past. "Time to move on. Time to be somebody else."⁸⁰ Meanwhile successive adaptations of *Hellblazer* across cinema, TV, animation, and gaming, alongside post-*Hellblazer* reboots of Constantine within mainstream superhero franchises of DC Comics, have seen the excising of the original series' sociopolitical content and working-class elements, replacing Constantine's class consciousness and anti-establishment vitriol with a more commodifiable charm.

But neoliberalism, class consciousness, and Constantine have refused to die. *Hellblazer* was relaunched as a limited series in 2019 under DC Comics' Black Label imprint, which sees Constantine return to a Britain suffering from the continuing impact of neoliberalism and a generation of austerity, while the ghosts of Thatcherism linger on via a resurgence in right-wing populist rhetoric resulting from the Brexit referendum.⁸¹ Described as a "poisonous love letter to the Constantines of the past,"⁸² Si Spurrier's run on *Hellblazer* sought to reintegrate horror, occultism, and political commentary. His storylines center on poverty and immigration, street gangs, social gentrification, political fascism, and the cultural fallout of living in both a post-Brexit UK and a post-Trump

80. Warren Ellis, John Cassaday (artist), "To Be in England, in the Summertime," 21.

81. See Fuchs, *Neoliberalism in Britain*; Karine Tournier-Sol, "From UKIP to Brexit: The Right-Wing Populist Surge in the UK"; Marius Guderjan, Hugh Mackay and Gesa Stedman, eds., *Contested Britain: Brexit, Austerity and Agency*.

82. Rich Johnston, "Si Spurrier & Aaron Campbell Return to John Constantine: Hellblazer."

US—where magic, class, and political discourse are closely intertwined.⁸³ While Constantine and *Hellblazer* had their roots in 1980s politics and occulture, the continuing popularity of Constantine’s picaresque charm and working-class magic can still provide inspiration for an oppositional stance to the continuing horrors lurking underneath the socioeconomic inequalities and political violence at the heart of contemporary society.

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83. See Egil Asprem, “The Magical Theory of Politics: Memes, Magic, and the Enchantment of Social Forces in the American Magic War”; Sabina Magliocco, “Witchcraft as Political Resistance, Magical Responses to the 2016 Presidential Election in the United States”; Edwin Coomasaru, “Magical Thinking: Is Brexit an Occult Phenomenon?”; Gary Lachman, *Dark Star Rising: Magick and Power in the Age of Trump*.

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