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Rejected knowledge...

So you mean that esotericists are the losers of history?

Wouter J. Hanegraaff

That's a very loaded question, so I'll try to unpack it carefully. First of all, it is important to see that the study of Western esotericism involves much more than studying "esotericists." Today it is not so hard to find groups or individuals who understand the terminology as a marker of identity, meaning that they would accept or even actively embrace it as a label for who they are and what they stand for. Whether implicitly or explicitly, such esoteric identities always involve some element of defiance in the face of negative mainstream perceptions, and often they are backed up by some kind of historical narrative about hidden or secret or discredited wisdom. Rather than being direct and explicit ("I'm an esotericist"), they may well be indirect and implicit, for instance when modern practitioners who do not self-identify as such still think of themselves as part of the great chain of ancient or perennial wisdom referred to as "the esoteric tradition." Such affirmations of an esoteric identity almost always reflect the idea that "esotericists" and their beliefs have been treated unfairly by the cultural mainstream, have lost the battle for legitimacy, and have been suppressed or marginalised by the powers of the establishment. Self-identified esotericists of course do not see themselves as "losers," but if they are asked, most of them will readily concede that the traditions or modes of thinking and practice that they value have become victims of a historiography written by the "winners." They know that they are on the wrong side of the hegemonic discourses or dominant grand narratives of Western culture.

This use of "esotericism" as an identity marker is relatively recent. The very term emerged during the second half of the eighteenth century¹ and is evidently part of the identity politics of that period. The perspectives and worldviews that we nowadays associate with "modern science" and "Enlightenment" were winning the battle against their opponents and assuming a position of hegemony in public discourse. To clearly establish *their* identity – to explain who they were and what they stood for – the advocates of Enlightenment needed to juxtapose themselves as sharply as possible against their polemical "others": religious bigotry, priestly deceit,

1 Neugebauer-Wölk, "Esoteriker und die Esoterik"; eadem, "Historische Esoterikforschung."

blind credulity, belief in magic, irrational delusion, superstitious practices, and so on. In short, to identify oneself with “the Light of Reason” meant rejecting “the Darkness of Superstition,” and in any such juxtaposition there is never much room for complexity or nuance. The inevitable result was that all those beliefs and practices that Enlightenment thinkers were dumping into the wastebasket of “rejected knowledge” tended to be reified and essentialised in the human imagination as something to which you could actually *belong*; henceforth it was easy to think of them as part of one single, more or less coherent anti-Enlightenment counter-tradition grounded in specific doctrinal assumptions incompatible with science and rationality.²

If “esotericism” as an identity marker emerged in the eighteenth century, so that it became possible for people to think of themselves (and eventually, of others) as “esotericists,” then clearly it cannot have existed before that period. For instance, the Platonic philosopher Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) is generally seen as a central figure in the history of Western esotericism, because his translations of ancient Platonic and Hermetic writings and his studies of topics such as astral magic became foundational for the later development of that field. Nevertheless, although Ficino is certainly of great importance to what we now see as the study of Western esotericism, it would be misleading to describe him as an “esotericist.” The difference lies precisely in the concept of identity: Ficino would have described himself as a devout Christian and a lover of Plato and the Platonic tradition, but would certainly *not* have defined himself as the adherent of an alternative and potentially heretical tradition independent from and possibly even opposed to Christianity. The difference may be subtle, but is important. It could be illustrated by drawing a comparison with another field of study: the history of sexuality and gender politics. It so happens that the same Ficino felt attracted to men rather than women, as can clearly be seen from his writings, and this has earned him a place in the history of homoeroticism and homosexuality.³ Nevertheless, it would make no sense to conclude that “Ficino was gay,” for his sexual orientation played no part in how he defined his own identity (who he was or what he stood for). In the same way, although Ficino is a central figure in the study of Western esotericism as understood today, this still does not make him an esotericist.

If “Western esotericism” is not to be understood in terms of identity politics (that is, as referring to some previously neglected tradition of “esotericists”

2 On this general process, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*.

3 On Ficino’s homoeroticism and its relevance to his synthesis of the Platonic tradition, *De amore*, see Hanegraaff, “Under the Mantle of Love.”

and their beliefs or practices), then how *is* it understood in modern scholarly research? A large part of the answer is that the study of esotericism has established itself as a respected field of modern academic research *precisely* insofar as it has succeeded in distancing itself from a primary focus on esoteric identities! Roughly before the beginning of the 1990s, scholars of esotericism were inspired almost exclusively by covert or open agendas of either promoting esotericism or warning their readers about its dangers. The modern study of Western esotericism is based on a paradigm shift in this regard, as more and more scholars began shifting their emphasis from a primary focus on esoteric identities towards impartial empirical and historical methodologies focused on exact description, interpretation, and contextualization of the ideas and traditions reflected in previously neglected corpora of primary sources. The point was to better understand the development and significance of “esotericism” as an important dimension of Western culture, rather than taking position in favour or against it.

As regards the trend of *pro*-esoteric identity politics in academia, during the twentieth century it coalesced around a group of high-profile scholars linked to the famous Eranos circle, whose perspective is often referred to as “religionism” today. Contrary to common misperceptions, this term should not be understood as a pejorative label,⁴ but as a technical term for an important academic approach to the study of religion. Among the most famous representatives are Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), Gershom Scholem (1897-1982), and Henry Corbin (1903-1978). As intellectual heirs of German Idealism (especially Schelling) and other movements critical of Enlightenment rationalism (notably Traditionalism), they were deeply concerned about the effects of modernisation, secularisation, and disenchantment.⁵ Convinced that the Western world was in a state of moral and existential crisis, they were looking for sources and traditions that could inspire a movement of spiritual renewal so as to restore a sense of deeper meaning to human existence. They found it in archaic religion, comparative mythology, universal or “archetypal” symbols, and last but not least, the neglected “esoteric” dimensions of the Abrahamic religions.⁶ Linked to initiatives such as the French *Université Saint Jean de Jérusalem*

4 Hanegraaff, “Esotericism and Criticism.”

5 Hakl, *Eranos*; Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 277-314. For the foundational Eranos figure Carl Gustav Jung and his concern with the “crisis of modern consciousness,” see Hanegraaff, “Great War of the Soul.”

6 See Hakl, *Eranos*. For an analysis of Eranos religionism and its crucial importance to the study of Western in the twentieth century, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 277-314, 334-355.

(USJJ) and many similar ventures along the lines of Eranos religionism, scholars saw it as their task to promote “esoteric” perspectives as an antidote to the negative and destructive forces of modernisation. In the words of Henry Corbin, his USJJ was founded “to confront the evil [that consists in] the total confusion in the spirits, souls, and hearts, a confusion resulting from the disaster of the secular institutions of the West.”⁷

As for *anti*-esoteric identity politics in academia, its most evident examples came from more or less Marxist-oriented intellectual perspectives linked to the “critical theory” of the Frankfurt School. One of its founding fathers, Georg Lukács (1885-1971), sought to explain the disaster of Fascism and National Socialism as resulting from the “destruction of reason” by a long line of thinkers, from the philosophy of Schelling to the racist theories of Houston Stewart Chamberlain.⁸ Other foundational intellectuals such as Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) and Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) were thinking in terms of a complex dialectics rather than a simple opposition between Enlightenment rationalism and its “non-rational” counterparts (magic, mythology, superstition, the occult); but they, too, saw the latter as somehow tainted with fascist and anti-semitic agendas or sympathies.⁹ From the pioneering historian of occultism James Webb (1946-1980)¹⁰ to the influential semiotician and novelist Umberto Eco (1932-2016),¹¹ not to mention popular bestsellers such as Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier’s *Morning of the Magicians* (1960) and their many offshoots,¹² such assumptions and associations became widespread among academics and intellectuals who kept warning their readers against the moral and political dangers of esotericism and the occult.¹³

7 Corbin, “L’Université Saint-Jean de Jérusalem,” 8; see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 343.

8 Lukács, *Zerstörung der Vernunft*.

9 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; and cf. Adorno’s famous “Theses against Occultism.” See also the contribution by Kilcher in this volume.

10 Webb’s invaluable volumes are grounded in a narrative that sees occultism as a “flight from reason” (*Occult Underground*) and a “struggle for the irrational” (*Occult Establishment*), congenial to a “Counter-Enlightenment” tradition that receives the main part of the blame for fascism, National-Socialism, and antisemitism.

11 See notably Eco, “Ur-Fascism.”

12 Pauwels and Bergier’s *Le Matin des Magiciens* is responsible for more or less single-handedly introducing a sensationalist genre of “Nazi occultism” that has been taken seriously even by many academics.

13 For a particularly extreme example, see Zinser, *Esoterik*; and critical discussion in Hanegraaff, “Textbooks and Introductions,” 193-195. For a cogent critique of the Frankfurt School approach, see Fisher, “Fascist Scholars, Fascist Scholarship.”

By the early 1990s, it was widely taken for granted in academic contexts that if you were writing about esotericism or the occult at all, inevitably you would be positioned somewhere towards the poles on a scale between advocates and opponents. Claims that esotericism could or should be studied from a “middle” position of scholarly impartiality, objectivity, or neutrality were still widely encountered with suspicion, as covert attempts by advocates of unreason to gain academic legitimacy for silly, questionable, subversive, or potentially dangerous ideas and traditions. Mainstream academic suspicions of this kind were clearly grounded in the standard polemical Enlightenment approach to these ideas and traditions as “rejected knowledge” that should not be given any further attention but should rather be dumped as trash in the wastebasket of academic research, to be ignored and hopefully forgotten forever. Let’s call this perspective “Enlightenment 1.” The dominance of such “no-platforming” attitudes began to be challenged successfully during the 1990s, by a new generation of scholars who insisted on a very different interpretation of the Enlightenment agenda: respect for empirical evidence no matter where it may lead, rejection of ideological prejudice of any kind, unrestricted freedom of inquiry, openness to all perspectives, and confidence in the emancipatory power of critical discussion and argumentation. From such a point of view, which we might call “Enlightenment 2,” it was (and is) considered axiomatic that no historical sources and no intellectual or religious traditions should be excluded from scholarly research. The goal should be promoting knowledge and understanding rather than any agenda of power or political hegemony.

Interestingly, this breakthrough of empirical research in the study of Western esotericism during the 1990s was greatly facilitated by the growing trend of academic “incredulity toward metanarratives” that is characteristic of the “Postmodern Condition.”¹⁴ As scholars became aware of how pervasively the hegemonic grand narratives of Western culture have structured and determined even our most basic assumptions concerning knowledge, truth, and power, the natural result was a new openness towards learning about the forgotten or suppressed perspectives of the “losers” in those metanarratives. It is of course well known that most attention in that regard has gone to the traditional exclusion and marginalisation of women, black people and other people of colour, various alternative or non-dominant genders and sexualities, and the victims of Western colonisation worldwide. Esotericism has not been widely recognised as belonging in this series, but in fact it clearly does belong there – after all, the most fundamental grand

14 Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, xxiv.

narratives of Western culture have been constructed on the very basis of “Othering” and rejecting precisely everything that is studied under the “esotericism” label today! Just think about it: the story of monotheism is one of victory over ancient “paganism” and “idolatry”; traditional church histories are full of battles against “superstitious heresies” or “demonic magic”; the standard story of the Reformation tells us how Protestants were fighting the very same opponents (although in a more extreme and radical register, now with Catholicism itself framed as “pagan, magical, idolatrous and superstitious”); the story of modern science narrates its triumph over “occult pseudo-scientific superstitions” such as astrology or alchemy; the story of the Enlightenment celebrates its victory over “irrational superstition”; and hegemonic success stories of colonial and imperial expansion have been trying hard to idealise Western culture as the bringer of civilisation to unenlightened cultures still dominated by “primitive magic” and “superstitious beliefs.”¹⁵ In short, if postmodern scholarship rejects the grand narratives of Western culture (including “Enlightenment 1”) and highlights the perspectives of the marginalised and suppressed, one might have expected it to embrace esotericism with great enthusiasm as a major new field of inquiry.

But that is not what happened. Although the study of Western esotericism has clearly profited from the new “postmodern” openness towards studying non-dominant traditions (or, if one prefers, towards the “losers” of the traditional grand narratives), our field has not become a central concern in such popular domains as cultural studies or critical theory. It is worth asking ourselves why. One reason may be simply the fact that academics are human beings whose natural tendency is to focus on dimensions of Western culture with which they can personally identify. Female academics may be attracted by women’s history, black academics by the history of racial prejudice, and so on; but few academics would see themselves as “esotericists” – or if they do, would like to admit it – and so it does not become a central point of attention for them. This brings us immediately to a second reason: nothing less than the pervasive power of that same Western “anti-esoteric” discourse, which is far more dominant and pervasive than most academics realise. Like those fish who wonder “what the hell is water?”,¹⁶ even radical critics of Western hegemonic narratives tend to be unaware that this discourse even exists, let alone how it structures their very own assumptions about acceptable and non-acceptable (rejected or discredited) forms of knowledge or methods of

15 Hanegraaff, “Globalization”; idem, “Religion and the Historical Imagination.”

16 Wallace, *This is Water*, 3-4.

inquiry. In short, esotericism is the blind spot *par excellence* among those radical theorists who are so eager to deconstruct “Western culture.” And then there is a third and final point: the strong tendency, in such domains as cultural studies, to start top-down from “Theory” and allow its premises to determine one’s further course of research and even one’s very choice of sources. If esotericism has no place in your theories to begin with (for the reasons just mentioned), you will see no reason to study historical source materials that could potentially enlighten you about its nature and relevance; or even more seriously, your theoretical framework may overwhelm your reading of such materials and determine your interpretations in advance. As a result, the sources will become subservient to your theories, and you may end up hearing only reflections of your own voice.¹⁷

For all these reasons I advocate an “Enlightenment 2” approach to the study of Western esotericism that proceeds empirically and historically, not top-down but bottom-up. This means that the starting point consists, quite simply, in carefully studying an enormous record of sources and materials that have remained unexplored because they used to be rejected as misguided, unimportant, dangerous, or irrelevant from the ideological perspectives of “Enlightenment 1” (as well as its ideological predecessors and successors). Research of this kind is best done with a minimum of theoretical baggage, at least at the outset, because the prime objective consists in *listening* to what the sources have to tell us instead of imposing our own ideas on them.¹⁸ It means travelling to strange and unfamiliar times and places, entering cultural and mental worlds that may be very different from our own and may be governed by implicit or explicit rules and assumptions that would never have occurred to ourselves. Research of this kind requires a certain humility, a willingness to bracket our own certainties and listen to the voices of Others. Its necessary presupposition is that we are not fatally enclosed in our own identity bubbles but are able to reach out and communicate across the boundaries of history and culture, so as to learn seeing the world through the eyes of other human beings who may be very different from us and can therefore teach us things we did not know.

To study esotericism from such a perspective means celebrating diversity and curiosity. I am convinced that if we “reject the rejection of rejected knowledge” and begin accepting its traditions and ideas as perfectly normal and legitimate dimensions of Western culture (regardless of how we may personally evaluate esoteric beliefs or truth-claims in any given case, which

17 One good example of this, in my opinion, would be Ramey, *Hermetic Deleuze*.

18 Hanegraaff, “Teaching Experiential Dimensions,” 167.

is an entirely different matter), this will allow us to begin writing *new and better grand narratives* on “Enlightenment 2” foundations. They will surely describe how many vital and fascinating ideas or traditions lost the battle for legitimacy and found themselves rejected, suppressed, and distorted; and it will show that the true course of Western culture has been infinitely more diverse and complicated than streamlined mainstream narratives would like us to believe. However, contrary to the dreams of identity politics in academia, the point of such new narratives is not to facilitate some paradigm shift that will reverse the course of history so that the “losers” may finally come out on top and the “winners” will lose. Ultimately, the true losers are only those who pursue narrow hegemonic agendas of power and domination for their own group while rejecting the open and never-ending human search for knowledge and understanding. Nobody wins unless everybody wins.