

Occult Trajectories II:

Modern Western esotericism and politics

Dr. Marco Pasi

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Thursday 10:00-12:45

Location:

Block 1: P.C. Hoofthuis, room 411

Block 2: Kunsthistorisch Instituut (Herengracht 286), room 402

Study guide

Code: RS8152

Credits: 12 ECTS

Form: seminar. Students will present the material from the reading list. Presentations will be followed by discussions led by the instructors.

Conditions of admission (ingangseis): BA Religious Studies, BA Humanities or BA Social Sciences including 30 EC Religious Studies.

Description: The course focuses on different aspects of the historical evolution of western esotericism in the modern period, from the eighteenth century up to the present days. The aim is to follow both the internal development, understood from the specific perspective of the field, and the broader cultural context in which western esotericism has taken shape, in order to understand both the inside logics of esotericism and its responses to external social pressure. Every year a different theme is chosen that offers a unique entry point in this historical development. For this year, the subject will be modern western esotericism and politics. Esotericism has been often identified with right-wing or reactionary politics. Authors such as Theodor Adorno and Umberto Eco have argued that there is an essential link between esotericism and political movements of the 20th century such as nazism and fascism. Esotericism is therefore supposed to be reactionary by nature. Is this idea tenable, or does it call for a more complex picture? Starting in the 1960s authors such as Frances Yates have argued that esoteric ideas may have played a role in the origins and the development of modern science. The connection between freemasonry and Enlightenment ideas in the 18th century, on the other hand, has been emphasized by a number of authors. During the 19th century, movements such as spiritualism and occultism were more often identified with liberal, progressive, and generally left-wing ideas, than with conservatism. Finally, even in the 20th century, it is not hard to find movements and authors associating esoteric concepts and practices with political ideas that are at the antipodes of the organicist, totalitarian vision of nazi-fascism. Indeed, as this course shall show, a number of highly influential esoteric movements are linked directly to the anarchist tradition. Finally, we shall investigate a number of esoteric currents that allege to represent a post-political form of politics. The

course will focus on these problematic issues, and will try to highlight their complexity through the use of both primary sources and secondary literature.

Teaching goals: While focusing on a single aspect of modern western esotericism, the student will become familiar with the main lines of its historical development. Most of the main figures, currents and movements will be mentioned and discussed. The course will also instruct the student to approach the reading material with a critical eye and develop awareness of broader cultural problems related to its origins, transmission, and interpretation.

Test procedure: The course will have two different sources of evaluation, expressed in grades. They consist in: 1) Oral presentations of the reading material during classes; 2) A final paper.

- 1) Oral presentations. Students are expected to deliver at least one oral presentation during the course. The presentations will bear on the reading material for the given class, which may consist in either primary or secondary literature, or both. Presentations will be based on those texts followed by an asterisk in the syllabus. The presentation should last around 20 to 25 minutes. It should contain the following elements: some information about the author and the background of the text (when was it produced?, in which cultural climate and/or historical context?); a short and clear overview of the structure and content of the text (is it divided in parts? what are the main arguments? what is the line of reasoning followed by the author?); a couple of significant quotations that the student considers particularly representative of the main arguments or ideas presented in the text; a critical assessment (this assessment will have different implications whether the text is a primary or a secondary source, but mainly what is required is an evaluation of the text on the basis of the claims it makes or the arguments on which it is based, be they religious or scholarly: are they convincing and/or consistent? do they show weak spots?). Students are strongly advised to use PowerPoint for their presentations. In case PowerPoint is not used, it is obligatory to prepare a handout to be distributed in class before the beginning of the presentation. Presentations will make for 40% of the final grade.
- 2) Final paper. The final paper will bear upon a subject chosen by the student and agreed upon by the lecturer. Students are advised to make an appointment with the lecturer in order to discuss possible subjects at an early stage of the course. The paper will consist of around 5000 words, excluding the bibliography. Students are encouraged to negotiate themes, literature, and the structure of the paper with the instructor as early as possible. They will have to submit a preliminary outline and bibliography for the paper before the 1st of April. The final version of the paper will have to be submitted before the end of the course and will make for 60% of the final grade. Students who will submit their paper after the deadline will have a reduction of one point in their grade for the paper. N.B.: submitted papers will not be heavier than 500 Kb (so, in case you intend to include images, please reduce them to a convenient size!). Papers exceeding this limit will be rejected until they conform to it.

For students who have never followed the BA courses *Westerse esoterie en Religieus Pluralisme* (previously: *Hermetica I*) or *Western Esotericism from the 18th century to the 20th century* (previously: *Hermetica IV*), the reading of one of the following books is also obligatory: Joscelyn GODWIN, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1994; or Wouter J. HANEGRAAFF, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Resits: In case the average of the grades for the presentations and other assignments is insufficient, it is possible to compensate it with an oral exam, which will bear upon the whole of the material read during the course, plus the chosen book for the students who have not followed *Hermetica I* (now *Westerse esoterie en Religieus Pluralisme*) or *Hermetica IV* (now *Western Esotericism from the 18th century to the 20th century*). The final paper cannot be repeated if insufficient.

Practical information: The course is in the form of a seminar. Therefore, even apart from the oral presentations, all students are expected to read the material for every class and to participate actively in the discussions.

Attendance is a requisite for a successful completion of the course, and consequently it will be checked. No more than three classes can be missed. Students who miss more than three classes will not be able to obtain the credit points at the end of the course and will be obliged to repeat it in the following year.

NB: This is a preliminary version of the program. The final version will be made available after the first class, when the schedule for the presentations will be set up.

For all further information, you can contact the lecturers directly at m.pasi@uva.nl and jchristiang@gmail.com.

Schedule

- 6 February 1. Introduction
- General introduction, discussion of themes and program, and attribution of the material from the reading list to be presented by the students.
- 13 February 2. Esotericism as Ur-fascism
- Theodor W. ADORNO, "Theses against Occultism", in: Id., *The Stars down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*, London - New York, Routledge, 1994, 128-134.
- Stephen CROOK, "Introduction: Adorno and Authoritarian Irrationalism", in: *ibid.*, 1-33.
- Arthur VERSLUIS, "Theodor Adorno and the 'Occult'", in: Id., *The New Inquisitions*, Oxford - New York, Oxford University Press, 2006, 95-104.
- Umberto ECO, "Ur-Fascism", *The New York Review of Books*, 42:11 (June 22, 1995), 12-15.
- 20 February 3. The politics of freemasonry in the 18th century: between Enlightenment and anti-Enlightenment (I)
- Margaret JACOB, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans*, London - Boston, George Allen & Unwin, 1981, 142-181.
- Robert DARNTON, *Mesmerism and the End of Enlightenment in France*, Cambridge, Ms - London, Harvard University Press, 1968, 107-125.
- Isaiah BERLIN, "The Counter-Enlightenment", in: Id., *Against the Current*, London, Pimlico, 1997, 1-24.
- Christopher MCINTOSH, *The Rose Cross and the Age of Reason*, Leiden - New York - Köln, E.J. Brill, 1992, 7-21, 91-111, 133-146.
- Pierre PONTARD, "Journal prophétique", in: Renzo DE FELICE, *Note e ricerche sugli 'Illuminati' e sul misticismo rivoluzionario (1789-1800)*, Roma, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1960, 173-215.
- 27 February No class
- 6 March 4. The radicalism of the spiritualists
- Logie BARROW, *Independent Spirits*, London - New York, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986, 96-138.
- Anne BRAUDE, *Radical Spirits*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1989, 32-55.

- 13 March 5. The politics of French occultism
- David Allen HARVEY, *Beyond Enlightenment*, Dekalb, Northern Illinois University Press, 2005, 185-216.
- James WEBB, *The Flight from Reason*, London, Macdonald, 1971, 188-202.
- Eliphas LEVI, “La Bible de la Liberté”, and “Doctrines religieuses et sociales”, in: F.P. BOWMAN, *Eliphas Lévi visionnaire romantique*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 67-84, 96-108.
- 20 March 6. The Theosophical Society and the cultural climate at the turn of the 20th century
- Joy DIXON, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England*, Baltimore - London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, 121-151.
- Martin GREEN, *Prophets of a New Age*, New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1992, 27-43.
- Martin GREEN, *Mountain of Truth*, Hanover, University Press of New England, 1986, 238-253.
- James WEBB, *The Flight from Reason*, London, Macdonald, 1971, 44-65.
- Bernice GLATZER ROSENTHAL, ‘Political Implications of the Early Twentieth-Century Occult Revival’, in: Ead. (ed.), *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, Ithaca - London, Cornell University Press, 1997, 379-418.
- 27 March Examination week: no class
- 3 April 7. Aleister Crowley’s ambiguous politics
- Marco PASI, *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics*, Durham, Acumen, 2014, 23-58.
- Aleister CROWLEY, “A Letter to Henry Ford”, and “The Scientific Solution to the Problem of Government”, in: Id., *The Revival of Magick*, Tempe, New Falcon Publications – O.T.O., 1998, 184-192, 208-210.
- 10 April 8. The politics of traditionalism
- Mark SEDGWICK, *Against the Modern World*, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 2004, 39-53, 95-117, 263-271.
- H.T. HANSEN, ‘A Short Introduction to Julius Evola’, in: Julius EVOLA, *Revolt against the Modern World*, New York, Inner Traditions, 1995, ix-xxii.
- Julius EVOLA, *Revolt against the Modern World*, New York, Inner Traditions, 1995, xxviii-xxxvii, 338-366.
- 17 April 9. Myth and reality of nazi-occultism

James WEBB, *The Occult Establishment*, La Salle, Open Court, 1976, 275-299, 333-336.

Nicholas GOODRICK-CLARKE, *The Occult Roots of Nazism*, Wellingborough, The Aquarian Press, 1985, 177-204.

- Karl Maria WILIGUT, various texts in: Stephen E. FLOWERS and Michael MOYNIHAN (eds.), *The Secret King*, Waterbury Center - Smithville, Dominion Press - Rûna-Raven Press, 2001, 51-82.

24 April

10. Dr. Timothy Leary & The Politics of Ecstasy

- Timothy Leary, *The Politics of Ecstasy*, Oakland, Ronin, 2003, pp. 1-8, 64-69, 87-102, 160-167, 332-371 (“Politics of Ecstasy: The Youth Revolutions of the 20th Century”; “The Fifth Freedom: The Right to Get High”; “Chemical Warfare: the Alcoholics vs. the Psychdelics”; “Drop out or Cop Out”; “The Molecular Revolution” - “Neurological Politics”). Available online: <http://archive.org/stream/politicsofecstas00learrich#page/n3/mode/2up>

1 May

11. Ontological Anarchism (I): Esoteric-Anarchism and Discordianism

Carole Cusack, *Invented Religions*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2010, pp. 27-52.

J. Christian Greer, “Not Opiate of the Masses, But Marijuana of the Lunatic Fringe: Discordianism, Guerilla Ontology and Ontological Anarchism”, publication forthcoming.

“The Lives and Ideas of Robert Anton Wilson” [Documentary]: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yOeSQa5llac>.

- Robert Anton Wilson, *Cosmic Trigger*, New York, Pocket Books, 1977, pp. 41-55.
- Robert Anton Wilson, “Anarchism and Magick in the Light of Interstellar Neurogenetics”, in *No Governor: A Journal for Anarchist Ideas*, pp. 2-7, 13, 24.

8 May

12. Ontological Anarchism (II): Anarcho-Esotericism & Chaos Magick

J. Christian Greer, “Occult Origins: Hakim Bey’s Ontological Post-anarchism”, *Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies*, publication forthcoming (available online).

Bob Black, *Anarchy After Leftism* (available online)

- Hakim Bey, *Temporary Autonomous Zone*, Brooklyn, Autonomedia, 2003 pp. 1-89 (available online; audio recording of selections of this material is available, if interested, send Christian an email).

15 May

13. Deep Ecology and Deep Green Resistance

J. Christian Greer, “Deep Ecology and the Study of Western Esotericism.” in: E. Asprem and K. Granholm (eds.), *Contemporary Esotericism*, pp. 287-308.

George Sessions, "Deep Ecology and the New Age Movement". In: *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, Boston, Shambhala, 1995, pp. 290-311.

- George Sessions and Bill Devall, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*, Layton Gibbs, Smith, 1985, pp. 1-40.