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Occult Roots of Religious Studies. On the Influence of Non-Hegemonic Currents on Academia around 1900, hg. v. Yves MÜHLEMATTER / Helmut ZANDER. – Berlin / Boston: De Gruyter/Oldenbourg 2021. (XII) 283 S. (Okkulte Moderne. Beiträge zur Nichthegemonialen Innovation, 4), geb. € 54,95 ISBN 978-3-11-066017-3

European intellectual culture at the end of the nineteenth century was highly interested in the invisible powers of nature, in the psychic capabilities of the human soul, in philosophical questions about the links between matter and spirit, and in alternatives to traditional European concepts of philosophy and science. These interests took the form of various overlapping discourses under labels such as “occultism”, “vitalism”, “neoromanticism”, “mysticism”, and “esotericism”. Interestingly enough, this was also the founding period of new academic disciplines at European and North American universities – from psychology to religious studies to anthropology to sociology to various regional studies (Egyptology, Tibetology, Indology, etc.), but also with regard to new chairs in what soon developed into today’s “natural sciences”.

That theories of occult powers of nature and the human mind have exerted a strong influence on academic research at the time has been convincingly argued by several historians recently. These new studies – only some of which are mentioned in the volume under review – have significantly changed our understanding of intellectual European culture around 1900. They have troubled common distinctions between the “natural sciences” and the “humanities”, and they have problematized characterizations of “occultism/esotericism” as representing marginal currents or “rejected knowledge”.

Occult Roots of Religious Studies builds on these historical revisions and focuses on the intersections of occult and esoteric discourse with the emergent field of the academic study of religion around 1900. As the volume’s subtitle makes clear, the authors are particularly interested in the impact of “non-hegemonic currents”, often situated outside of the universities, on academic theory and practice in the interdisciplinary field of religion studies. The chap.s cover a wide spectrum of topics, currents, and individuals: We learn about religious studies, folklore studies, and the occult field in Great Britain; about Nees von Esenbeck as a case of magnetism, spiritualism, and academic discourse in the natural sciences; about the links between occultist kabbalah and the academic theories regarding this form of Jewish mysticism; about John Woodroffe who linked Tantra and experimental science; about Walter Y. Evans-Wentz who found himself between theosophy, Celtic myth, yoga, and Tibetan Buddhism; about Paul Masson-Oursel as scholar and practitioner of “esotericism”; and about Walter Andrae’s anthroposophical considerations when he designed the ancient processional street of Babylon at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. The editors’ introduction and *Helmut Zander’s* chap. on

definitions of esotericism provide some background information and framework. The vol. concludes with 14 “short biographies” of individuals who were influential in the field of (the academic study of) occultism and esotericism.

Most of the chap.s offer new historical insights into currents and individuals who would deserve more attention than they have previously received. The chap.s are presented as case studies for *the influence of non-hegemonic currents on academia around 1900*. But if they are *exempla* – in contrast to mere illustrations and random examples – it will be important to understand what exactly these cases represent. What is the overall theory or paradigm that the exemplum displays? And what is the method that explicitly relates the exemplum to that theory or paradigm? Reading through the various chap.s renders the impression that much of this conceptual work still needs to be done. Zander’s courageous attempt at structuring the discussion about occultism and esotericism (14–43) is helpful, but it does not provide a theory or paradigm that the subsequent chap.s refer to. Many authors do not use the term “esotericism”, and some do not even refer to “occult/occultism” to link their arguments to the overarching discussion (*Jens Schlieter*, for example).

Maybe this lack of conceptual cohesion across the vol. also has to do with the analytical framework itself, which rests on implicit understandings that the actual material seems to contradict. What does that mean? Much of the vol.’s analytical framework suggests a parallel structure of “occult/esoteric versus academic/scientific” on the one hand, and “non-hegemonic versus hegemonic” on the other. At several points, the distinction between “insider/practitioner” and “outsider/scholar” is added as another parallel feature of the underlying discourse. Over against this assumption it may be argued that the distinction between hegemonic and non-hegemonic does not mirror the distinction between academic and occult/esoteric. Rather, these distinctions are constantly renegotiated, and much of the occult/esoteric discourse actually entered the mainstream and became part of hegemonic culture. What matters is the positionality and situatedness of all forms of knowledge, be it academic or non-academic. Instead of using the artificial distinction between (subjective) insider and (objective) outsider, it would be more precise to speak of discourse communities across various cultural locations, communities that legitimize and delegitimize orders of knowledge about the occult. With such a tool it is easier to explain why even leading academics such as Edward B. Tylor or Max Weber were personally involved in occult and esoteric theory and practice.

The situatedness of all knowledges highlights another topic that every discussion of hegemony and non-hegemony needs to address. Academic knowledge is not only situated in identifiable institutions but even more so in intersectional points of hegemony such as gender, race, and class. While colonial hegemonic structures are addressed in a few chap.s (for instance, by *Julian Strube*), it would have been interesting to hear more about the intersections of gender, race, and class in the formation and rearrangement of hegemonic orders of knowledge about religion and the occult. That would move the discussion a step further than the humble goal of the editors that “this volume seeks to at least promote the study of esotericism more as a cross-cutting, interdisciplinary topic than as a clearly demarcated field of research” (2).

Occult Roots of Religious Studies is a much welcome contribution to an ongoing discussion about the links between the field of religion studies and the various currents in occultism and esotericism around 1900. Published Open Access, it will find its way into classrooms and it will reach an audience across various fields of interest. The chap.s offer relevant material for a better understanding of the place of esoteric and occult discourses in academia and in different societal and

cultural fields (from the arts to politics). What this material actually means for our interpretation of European and North American hegemonies of knowledge is a question for which this volume only offers tentative answers. It is the job of the scholarly community to pick up these threads and to weave them into a (more) persuasive and perhaps challenging analysis.

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