

REVIEW

Gary Lachman, *Politics and the Occult: The Left, the Right, and the Radically Unseen* (Wheaton: Quest, 2008), ISBN 9780835608572 (pbk), 261pp. £18.99.

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When I lived in the East End of London I often passed the blue plaque in honour of Annie Besant on the wall of the old Bryant and May match factory (now ‘yuppie’ apartments), commemorating her involvement with the famous match-girls’ strike of 1888. A local street is also named after her. But while her radical secular politics – which included early and highly controversial support for contraception – make her a continued exemplar of the political left, I always wondered how many of her modern-day admirers know of her much greater interest in the occult. As with Newton, the occult interests are airbrushed out. Hence I was most interested to receive Gary Lachman’s study of politics and the occult, and to find in its opening pages the point that is obvious from Besant’s case: those pursuing the occult may pursue left-wing progressive politics just as often as perhaps the better-known tendency to pursue right-wing politics. Indeed, the idea that the occult is associated with fascist politics – established in a series of highly popular books on the Nazi era – is so widespread that it needs just the challenge that Lachman sets out to make.

Lachman does make the point at the end of the book, however, that he is not really that ‘political’ himself, though the (astonishingly) extensive research he has carried out in this investigation has helped him better define his own political stance. The real achievement of this book is its comprehensive sweep of the Western occult tradition, starting with the seventeenth century – and with many references to Renaissance and earlier figures – leading up to the 1960s, introducing not only major occultists (most of whom I knew about) but also many minor ones (almost all of whom were new to me) along with their forays into politics. The sheer breadth of this makes it impossible to set forth in any detail the occult teachings or practices of all these individuals, but the perhaps unintended side-effect is effectively to present Western history

through the lens of the occult. This is both rewarding and also limiting, in that in the process it feels as if the occult for Lachman is in fact the horizon of religion–spirituality. I will return to that point a little later, but first, more about Lachman’s occultists and their politics. What precisely does he intend with the two terms ‘occult’ and ‘politics’?

Early on, Lachman sets out a brief definition of the occult, which I found interesting because I had not come across it before. He regards the basic tradition in occult philosophy to be the recovery of an ancient wisdom, once known but now lost. He says: ‘The occultist’s or esotericist’s job is to discover its traces in the historical record and follow them to the source. The truth was given once, in an original revelation, and our job is to get back to this primal disclosure.’ This at least is conservative occultism, one which tends to value the past and tradition, and which is sceptical to modernity. But, much better than trying to pin down occultism in a few sentences, he moves quickly into the main part of the book which is devoted to the occultists under discussion. I think this is always a good idea: to define what philosophy is, for example, by giving an initial list of philosophers; science with a list of scientists and so on. By the end of a survey of the practitioners of a discipline the contours of that discipline emerge well-defined.

‘Politics’, however, is less well defined by the end of Lachman’s book. In the first half of the book, roughly speaking, I found myself mentally using the old spelling ‘politicks’ to remind myself that we are dealing largely with court intrigue rather than the ballot box and disciplined parliamentary debate. At one level all the occultists described by Lachman had visionary agendas for society and petitioned powerful individuals of the day to adopt their ideas. In almost all cases – it seems – Lachman is forced to conclude regretfully that their petitions fell on deaf ears. The picture that Lachman most usefully paints for us, however, is that right up to and including the Nazi era, the ‘court’ – whether of kings or later forms of non-democratic government – could well be populated with a hotbed of occult advisers, whether John Dee to Elizabeth I, Rasputin to the Tzar, or simply astrologers, diviners or sages whispering to the powerful. (Leaders of democratic governments in recent times may not be less susceptible – I think of Lord Balfour’s Zionism, or Reagan and his interest in end-time prophecies.) Politics has changed enormously over the centuries, so it is no surprise to find that mostly older definitions need to be called on in examining many of Lachman’s occultists. This also means that the left–right distinction he wishes to make is not quite how it is seen in modern politics, where it has now become mostly a debate on how big the state should be. Certainly the term ‘progressive’ is helpful here to describe the left, and it is in the question of how many occultists through this period can be thus described that I was most interested. I was

not disappointed: I found Annie Besant listed here – naturally – and also the Victorian reformer Edward Carpenter and his rough contemporary Rudolf Steiner. I was not, however, left with an obvious complete list of the progressives as I was overwhelmed by the sheer number of occultists discussed in the book, and so I could not, on a single reading, remember more than a fraction of them or their persuasions. Instead, I was left with the impression that in fact the majority of occultists dealt with here were indeed of a socially conservative nature, inclined to the idea that the masses should be led by an elite who were secret adepts in occult wisdom.

What the book left me with is the thought that it is perhaps inevitable that students and adepts of a secret wisdom (both ‘occult’ and ‘esoteric’ mean hidden or occluded) form a small minority who, in wishing the majority to benefit from their insights, will take a rather lofty stance towards them. Lachman often returns to this theme, and early on places this issue in the context of the philosophy of Leo Strauss, forefather to the American ‘neocons’, and who used the term ‘noble lie’ to describe the version of the truth given to the masses. I was surprised that Lachman did not point out that this originates with Plato in his *Republic*. What Lachman does provide is a valuable new term (to me at least) to describe this form of elitism: *synarchy*. He defines the term in his discussion of the late-nineteenth-century occultist Alexandre Saint-Yves d’Alveydre as meaning ‘a kind of super-totalitarianism’ in which a secret elite, hidden behind conventional forms of government – it does not matter what – control all the major institutions of state. Where this differs from Plato’s version is, I suppose, the degree to which the wisdom that these secret rulers draw on is explicitly occult, that is, derived from ‘higher’ sources. I discovered that synarchy as a term applies in fact to any rule by a secret elite, regardless of the origins of their ideology, and generally requires the maintenance of a rigid caste system.

Plato, of course, did hand down some occult ideas to the West, including reincarnation and the legend of Atlantis. His politics are most emphatically of the right, particularly in his *Laws*, but the spiritual tradition named after him – Neoplatonism – includes many figures who are not obviously occultists, and who appear more progressive than Plato. I am thinking particularly of Plotinus, whose rather gnostic teachings point to a quite different religious–spiritual sensibility than that of the occult, and whose third-century community in southern Italy appeared to have been remarkably progressive. I raised this issue earlier, that Lachman’s book provides a radical view of Western religious and political history seen through the lens of occultism, as if it were the only spiritual lens available. This does not reduce the value of the book, but means that it will rather preach to the converted. This is a shame, because both secularists who reject the occult as superstition

(Bertrand Russell called its flourishing in the Renaissance the reappearance of 'antique nonsense') and those who follow other religious–spiritual paths are unlikely to buy into the book's important premise: that there are also progressive occultists.

Nevertheless, I do believe that all spiritual paths are valid and important, and that this book has deepened my historical understanding of the occult, even if my spiritual centre of gravity lies elsewhere. It also seems a good opportunity to raise some questions about the occult that would be useful to examine, and which would have a bearing on the question of its relation to politics (though I am not suggesting in any way that this book should have tackled them in addition to its already ambitious remit). First, the idea that there was some original wisdom of which the occultist has to find the source in the distant past does not quite ring true for me, but suggests instead that we could fruitfully examine the many common elements between occultism and animism–shamanism. The distant human past comprises first the hunter–gatherer aeons in which animism–shamanism was the core spirituality; then with less certainty a period of Goddess culture based on horticulture; and then the religions of the patriarchal agricultural societies, the surpluses of which led to the first city-states and the emergence of occultism as we now know it. Is our modern occultism a refinement of animism–shamanism refracted through city society and its scientific–philosophic discoveries? (Was the 'herb-vendor' that Rudolf Steiner met on the train to Vienna – and who greatly influenced him – perhaps a remnant of middle-Europe shamanism, always beyond the reach of Catholicism?) At the other end of the historical scale – and I am less confident that this has not been answered somewhere – are we seeing an equivalent shift from occultism to the imaginal (as in the works of Henry Corbin and Richard Tarnas)? Is the imaginal the inheritor tradition to occultism after the revolution of Kant? In both historical extremes, oddly, we find more democratic and less hierarchical contexts for the working out of esoteric practice and its potential to influence society through politics.

In conclusion, I would say that this is a valuable book for enthusiasts of the occult, though a little inconclusive as to the ubiquity or otherwise of progressive occultists. I shall certainly use it as a reference to the currents of occult influence in Western history and to the many lesser-known occultists whose lives and thought intersected the better-known ones – something of a genealogy of the occult, perhaps. But I would love to see its central theme of progressive occultism pursued again with the left-wing political acuity of, for example, the late Tony Judt, and with the consciousness that Western history is framed by many competing religious–spiritual traditions not conflatable to the occult.