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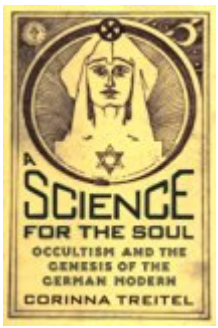
Corinna Treitel. *A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004. 366 pp. $46.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-7812-1.



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What does it mean to write a history of occultism? Is it to study the fringes of society, the underworld of culture? Is it to study esoteric forms of reactionary escapism? In her thoroughly researched book, *A Science for the Soul*, Corinna Treitel suggests that to study the occult is not at all to study marginal phenomena. Rather, it is to access from an unlikely angle all of the complexities and contradictions of a most central concern: namely, what Treitel calls the "German modern." Treitel insistently and convincingly depicts the occult movements in Germany not as a retreat from modern society--with its urban masses, its industrial logic, and its depersonalized materialism. Rather, she suggests that the occult was one of the important ways in which individuals and organizations in modern Germany gave meaning to their own lives, and simultaneously gave meaning to the categories that have come to occupy center stage in modern German historiography, categories such as science, religion, state, liberalism, and subjectivity.

From the introduction, one might understand the primary purpose of Treitel's book to be the contestation of a previous historiography led by George Mosse and others that emphasized the influence of the occult movement on Nazi ideology.[1] This literature had understood the occult as a dimension of *vlkisch* ideology that fostered irrationalism, that in turn fed into a race-based mysticism in which Nazi leaders were to have cloaked themselves and their racial policies. A more recent literature has begun to contest the alliance between occultism and Nazism, and it is to this literature that Treitel adds her own work.[2] Painting the occult not as a form of reactionary mysticism, but rather as a set of practices aimed at negotiating modernism, Treitel seeks to clarify the lines between occultism and *vlkisch* ideology, recognizing in particular the embrace of the very modern, scientific practices that infused the occult movements--even as they pursued mystical ends. Not surprisingly, the relationship of Nazism to occult movements occupies center stage in the last chapter of the book. Here Treitel makes a careful distinction between individual interest by Nazi leaders in occult experiments and methods, and Nazi police and policy hostility to occult movements that were said to exhibit ideological

tendencies inconsistent with Nazi aims (pp. 240-241).

While this is a very important intervention, and provides a valuable framework for the book itself, the real weight and strength of the book lies in its study of the occult at the fin de siecle and in the Weimar era. Here the book makes for a fascinating contribution to the newer literature on German liberalism. While it recognizes the importance of a former school of German historiography that stressed the authoritarian illiberalism of the state in the German ***Kaiserreich***, it finds liberalism in the public sphere--in terms of civic organizations and public discussion--to be much more of a work in progress. In this regard, the book examines things such as the thriving publication industry that profited from the occultist movements; the role of the public in determining the reliability of evidence and experience in scientific demonstration; and the reliability of that same evidence and experience in public legal proceedings.

Pursuing this theme of a vibrant public sphere, Treitel makes two strategic decisions in the book that enable her to cut the widest possible swath through German culture. First, she takes as her focus not so much the ***beliefs*** of individuals in the occultist movements, but rather their ***practices***--the occult "in action," as she calls it. While Treitel does not spend a lot of time explaining what this distinction means, or what the relationship(s) of belief to practice might be, one can discern from her own practice the implications of this move. By not focusing solely on true believers, those who make some variety of the occult the central and possibly single tenet of their own belief system, she is able to look at the occult within more of a "marketplace" of beliefs.[3] That is, she looks at the wide range of those who dabbled in the occult--those who, for instance, experimented with sances or with dowsing--but who did not necessarily make such occult practices the center of their belief structures. In this way, she points to the larger consumer culture in which the occultist movements participated, and on which their economic existence depended. Figures as seemingly diverse as Sigmund Freud and Hitler could both partake in the occasional sance or dowsing, without committing fully to occultism.

The turn to occult practices rather than belief also enables Treitel to depict how a relatively widespread interest in the occult motivated other fields of inquiry to consolidate their own beliefs and practices against the occultist movements. This development is perhaps clearest in the first two chapters--which may be the best in the book--as Treitel explores the relationship of occult movements to the emerging "science" of psychology. Here she convincingly argues that this emerging field of psychology was deeply influenced by experiments in occult phenomena, but that it also sought to distance itself and its own modes of experimentation from the taint of the occult and connotations of mysticism or pseudoscience. It was precisely because of the proximity and overlapping areas of inquiry, however, that such a clarification was necessary to the professionalization of psychology as a scientific discipline. Such points of clarification, however, were not confined to psychology or other sciences dealing with human experience and knowledge. Treitel argues also that established religions--especially Catholicism--felt the need to resist the occult movements not so much because the occult tempted its followers, but rather because it needed to clarify how its own appeals to certain kinds of mysticism differed from those of the occultists. In this way, Treitel suggests throughout the book, the presence of the occultist movements helped to foster the clarification of terms such as "religion," "science," "psychology," and even the "individual."

It is here, in the definition of the limits of the occult in relationship to other spheres of knowledge that the second strategic decision of Treitel's book becomes important--namely, her decision

not to define "the occult." Her book treats the occult as a fluid concept, as a concept that is in process, and whose character emerges only in relation to other fields of inquiry and practice. What emerges as the "lunatic fringe," as she often calls it, is determined more by the beholder than by the content of the fringe itself. So, for instance, Sigmund Freud would come to resist the occult in order, at least in part, to distinguish his own practice of psychoanalysis from the form of depth psychology elaborated by his wayward disciple, Carl Jung. Likewise, in a different moment and with a vastly different purpose, Heinrich Himmler would condemn the "hocus pocus" aspects of "the occult," while supporting "legitimate research on astrological questions" (p. 225). If the occultist movements prompted other cultural phenomena to clarify their own identity, the movement was reciprocal: a wide range of shifting fields of inquiry as well as political and cultural contexts worked actively in the early twentieth century to shape what constituted (and constitutes?) "the occult."

The book stretches from 1850 to 1945, but its real concentration is between the 1890s and the 1920s when the occult movements were establishing themselves institutionally. With this particular concentration, the reader will notice one strange lacuna: there is no sustained discussion of World War I. While the book often moves fluidly between the Wilhelmine era and the Weimar era, it does draw out some of the differences in occultist strategies before and after the war. In particular, it paints the occultist movements before the war as interested primarily in the subjective experience of the individual, and after the war as participating in many of the standardizing and objectifying methods that gained popularity in social reform during the Weimar era. Yet the reader is still left to wonder what exactly the effects of the war on the occultist movements were, and how such transitions came about. Were the occultist movements able to continue their publications during the war? Did they experience censorship from the state, as many organizations did? Did they, like the psychoanalytic movement and similar groups, have to halt local and/or international congresses? Did they learn some of their post-war standardizing methods from participation in the war effort itself? Clearly answers to these questions could fill an entire volume themselves. Yet the book might have benefited from at least some hint in their direction.

That said, the book is a very valuable contribution to the field of German cultural history. It offers three appendices that list the organizations, presses, and other institutions related to the occult, which will prove useful to the specialist researcher. In addition, its comprehensive bibliography will be a valuable resource for students of German cultural history more generally. Finally, the book is simply a pleasure to read, written in a very accessible, inviting style that will make it a treat for the specialist and non-specialist reader alike.

Notes

[1]. George Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964).

[2]. See for example Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and Their Influence on Nazi Ideology* (New York: New York University Press, 1992).

[3] See Peter Berger, The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969), pp. 137-138.

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