Irrelevant Features of Anarchism

An Indigenous Review of Occult Features of Anarchism (2018)

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I have been sitting on this review for quite a while. This short book comes up quite often when combing through anarchist literature on occultism (and vice-versa). With the release of more than a million documents from the Epstein files bringing new relevancy to the issue of conspiracy theories, I think the most fortuitous time to publish it has come. Or went, because I again sat on this review for many months.

Occult Features of Anarchism, by Erica Lagalisse, concerns the alleged roots of classical anarchism (and the wider radical milieu) in Western esotericism and in particular, the late antique *Corpus Hermeticum*. This is combined with an anthropological analysis of conspiracy theories, loosely (indeed, very loosely) connected through the Masonic tradition.

A brief summary

Lagalisse begins *Occult Features* with two pastiches in her activist and fieldwork. First, she recounts dissuading a fellow activist from accepting an antisemitic conspiracy theory during an EZLN event in Montreal (pg. 3). Then, she observes Montreal anarchists marginalizing an Indigenous Mexican woman named Magdalena – on a speaking tour organized by the EZLN – due to a combination of gendered and racial prejudice (pg. 6). These events left her deeply changed, and her research interests shifted to the influence of theosophy and Freemasonry on classical anarchism (pg. 8). Through this analysis, she hopes to "illustrat[e] the cosmology of classical anarchism" and thus complicate anarchism's alleged relation to secularity (pg. 11). For Lagalisse, this sort of analysis is central to "a decolonized anarchism that properly challenges gendered power", in which the modes in which the modern colonial state privatizes religion and gender – while reproducing its own cosmology and patriarchal structure – are studied (pg. 12). Thus her focus on esotericism: "any inquiry into the gender of the modern revolutionary left that digs farther back in history than the union movements of the masculine wageworking proletarian […] necessarily stumbles upon the institution of Freemasonry, among other clandestine fraternities" (pg. 8).

Her first premise is that anarchism, like all Western political theory, is innately tied up with theology, following from Schmitt and Sahlins – particularly, the dialectic between the immanence and transcendence of God. Utopian socialism, anarchism, and Marxism rely on a "cosmology that is incipient in the Middle Ages, changing and crystallizing in the Renaissance, and gradually given a scientific makeover throughout the Enlightenment and up to the twentieth century" (pg. 18). A crucial point for Lagalisse here is the "shift from the spontaneous millenarian movement to the organized heretical one" which is related to the "dissemination of diverse mystical doctrines" that began in Europe during the Crusades – the *Corpus Hermeticum* is a "largely unrecognized" source of modern leftist politics (pg. 20). This elite practice of magic was in stark contrast to the Early Modern witch trials, which for Lagalisse, represents the gendered persecution of lay healers, wise women, and other "proper empiricists", which was occurring as the fathers of science were trying to turn lead into gold (pg. 30).

Freemasonry arises out of this gendered state of affairs. Through their influence on Freemasonry, Lagalisse contends that "while real builders are starving", elite men are more concerned with worshipping the Grand Architect and deny entry to "Jews, women, servants, and manual laborers" (pg. 40). Freemasonry, for Lagalisse, "is what social movements look like after the witch hunts" (pg. 37). From Masonic lodges come revolutionary brotherhoods, formed by Masons and

quasi-Masons like Proudhon, Blanqui, and Bakunin (pgs. 44-50). Masonic influence is apparent even on the level of leftist symbolism, from the "pagan pentagram" (the red star) to the "compass, level, and plumb line of Masonic iconography" (pg. 54). This cabalism was tempered by theosophy, Swedenborgianism, and other esoteric movements, through influential anarchists like Owen, Fourier, and Saint-Simon (pg. 57). The Marxian dialectic, too, is rooted in occultism, through Hegel, who had a deep interest and influence in Hermeticism (pgs. 64-66).

From here, Lagalisse begins analyzing anarchism as a historical object. The "gendered quality" of anarchism is "arguably more fundamental" than its relationship to male worker's movements but extends back and "articulates with an occult cosmology that is older still" (pg. 79).

Anthropologists have yet to give up their calipers

The first and most pertinent aspect of any book review is whether or not one should endeavor to read (and of course *purchase*) said book. Unfortunately, I think the chief issue with *Occult Features* is its diminutive audience. For whom is this written, if not other anthropologists with a very narrow interest in anarchism as a movement? As an archaeologist (a bit of Ausonia lore for you) and a so-called anarchist I suppose I qualify, but the ultimate pith of her argument is, to be frank, old news to me. I am not white, a secularist, an atheist, or someone who takes 19th century political theory very seriously. Nor am I one to be particularly defensive of the "anarchist" label or movement, or one who is unfamiliar with the history of Western esotericism. I do not need to be told, by a white academic no less, that anarchist theory has historically been dominated by white men of a certain economic standing, and that this patterns much of the anarchist movement today. Indeed this can be said of practically all political movements, and really, all modernity – a point I shall return to.

Despite Lagalisse's description of the work as a "short, accessible work" (pg. 15) with import for radicals, for someone without a background in higher education, her opaque references are unlikely to be decoded. Normally I resent claims like this, as they are often deployed as thought-terminating clichés or ego-maintaining mechanisms, but in this case, it genuinely feels intentionally convoluted. To illustrate this point, towards the back cover, she matter-of-factly states that "the cross-cultural dialogues among heretics during the Crusades happened in the context of complex power relations" (pg. 75-76). In what other context could "cross-cultural dialogues" have happened during the Crusades, or indeed any other point in history, let alone between religious minorities? Besides intellectual posturing, there is nothing of substance in such a sentence, and Lagalisse does not elaborate – it seems a half-hearted attempt to shove another marginalized author into her references, in this case, the great Edward Said. It is not the only time she does this.

Despite the fact Lagalisse recognizes the anarchist "selective fascination with Indigenous cultures and cosmologies" as having an origin in the colonial encounter (pg. 60-62), she makes very sure we all know well that she is referencing Indigenous women like Audra Simpson unlike everyone else (pg. 82-83). This is shown to be plainly fetishistic when she defends a white academic who falsely presents herself as Indigenous American simply because she has applicable theory for her study (footnotes on pg. 83).[1] For Lagalisse, it is good enough that this "hotly debated" aca-

[1] The academic here is Andrea Smith, who falsely claims to be Cherokee and has been routinely taken to task by Indigenous women. In 2015, twelve signed an open letter which stated that Smith and others "reinforce[d] a history

demic is "ignored". Of course, settlers do not claim to be Indigenous to be ignored, but to siphon off the little capital (both social and material) relegated to Indigenous people in academia.

This tokenization is also present in her critique of the treatment of antisemitic conspiracy theories in activist circles. Recounting an incident on an Occupy Wall Street listserv, Lagalisse recounts how some Jewish participants elected to "straighten out" an antisemite rather than excise them from the email forum. This, apparently, is presented as evidence that antisemites should be educated. Her entire account of the discussion is based on Jewish participants vs. non-Jewish participants, though it is unclear how she is identifying each. Perhaps grilling each discussant on their respective ancestry? Indeed, anthropologists have yet to give up their calipers (pg. 96-101).

Lagalisse's apparent lack of self-awareness was a major hurdle when reading this work. She is a white, college-educated Québécoise from Montreal, and at times this is painfully apparent. Lagalisse's "hope that some persons identified as 'conspiracy theorists' read [this book] and feel both productively challenged and validated by [her] words" (pg. 110) is foolhardy – at least for the "subaltern" conspiracy theorist she describes as believing in a fraternity of Jewish men who know the secrets of magic and mind control (pg. 3).

This is not only laughable, but ironic, too. Lagalisse levies a very particular critique of anarchism:

...as any anarchist can see, fluency in a particular vocabulary, knowing the names of certain historical figures, and being vouched for by someone "in the know" is all requirement for entry into the anarchist club, as is a commitment to a specific ideological constellation informed by the history of its practice, wherein men's oppression by the state becomes the prototype for power in general (pg. 81).

Lagalisse's observation lacks all semblance of self-awareness except for scant couple of sentences in the last quarter of the book, in which she notes that "anarchist academics...do want me to be accepted into the club and kindly offer [her] the password" (pg. 87) and that "[i]t is arguably no coincidence that as a university professor [she] may respectably discuss Central Intelligence Agency involvement in drug trafficking, yet a truck driver who says the same thing is often tossed off as a 'crazy conspiracy theorist'" (pg. 101). She is keen to show her entrance into a club of her own, deploying particular scripts and vocabulary, and fetishizing colonized subjects as ethnographers love to do.

Secret history, or shaky historiography?

Lagalisse, for her dependence on historical methods, shows a strange silence towards very pertinent topics in medieval and Renaissance history of the Western esotericism, and deep mischaracterizations of others. In short, Lagalisse's historiography is incredibly shaky, and she does not seem to pay close attention to her sources. She peppers her book with a number of minor factual errors, which range from small issues with her Latin, to incorrectly implying that the attribution of the *Corpus Hermeticum* to Hermes Trismegistus is a later aberration,[2] to anachro-

in which settlers have sought to appropriate every aspect of indigenous life and absolve themselves of their own complicity with continued dispossession of both indigenous territory and existence."

[2] "The Hermetica or *Corpus Hermeticum* is a collection of texts written in the first or second centuries A.D., yet during the Renaissance they were held to be the work of Hermes Trismegistus" (pg. 20). The *Corpus* was held to be written by Hermes throughout antiquity and the medieval period. In fact the Hermetica and the *Corpus Hermeticum*

nistically transposing a medieval Syriac tract to a context 600 years before its composition,[3] to a pet peeve of mine – claiming that Ramon Llull was "primarily influenced by" kabbalah (pg. 25).[4] Lagalisse states outright that Leo Tolstoy was a theosophist with no supporting evidence, while the sources she cites do not mention theosophy (pg. 59). She authoritatively claims that Hegel was a Freemason, citing Susan Buck-Morss, who makes no such claim (pg. 66).[5] These errors are admittedly small, and sometimes inconsequential, but they do not inspire confidence in Lagalisse's grasp of this subject or her scholarship.

Other problems with her historiography are more complex. Following the Spanish scholar Alberto Valín Fernández, Lagalisse assumes that the origin of the red star and the circle-A have direct origins in Masonic iconography. She identifies the logo of the Federación Regional Española de la AIT as composed of the Masonic "compass, level, and plumb line" altered such that the compass and level form an A inside of a circle (pg. 54). It is dubious as to whether or not the circle-A can even be considered truly Masonic, in the sense of having a direct origin in Freemason lodges of the 19th century. Why should we accept that the compass, level, and plumb line are emblematic of speculative Masons (initiates) and not operative masons (manual laborers who actually work with stone)? Parsimony dictates that we should assume the simpler hypothesis is the correct one: regardless of the influence of the former, which I am not convinced of, surely the latter were more influential in a *labor union*?

It is not impossible that Freemasons could have proposed or influenced the iconography of the FRE-AIT. But whether such speculation is relevant or should be accepted as evidence of the Masonic cosmology of anarchism is another question altogether. A much more egregious example of her evidence-free sort of historical reasoning is apparent in her analysis of a zine, circulating in Montreal, which features a prominent circle-A in a Gothic typeface. Lagalisse claims that the icon displayed a "clearly stylized plumb line of Masonic iconography – quite possibly unbeknownst to the zine maker". She contrasts this with the zine itself, which emphatically rejects "waiting on someone else or some divine force to change shit" (pg. 78). This particular example, however, is merely a coincidence . The angular hairlines and lozenge-shaped finials are ornaments of the blackletter script: there is no shortage of "plumbobs" in Gothic capitals.[6] Lagassile can perhaps be forgiven for failing to recognize this – I only recognize it myself for being involved in Chicano gang culture in my youth, though of course we called it an "Old English" handstyle – however, it should not be forgiven that she takes her ultimately baseless speculation for fact, especially as she attempts to 'educate' those without higher education.

Similarly, she claims that the Renaissance and the Enlightenment was "inaugurated" by "the dissemination of diverse mystical doctrines" like "Platonic philosophy, Pythagorean geometry,

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are not actually the same thing; the *Corpus* is a specific selection of texts from late antiquity whereas the Hermetica is much broader. Either way, it was in the Renaissance that the attribution to Hermes was disproven by Isaac Casaubon.

[3] That is, the *Emerald Tablet*.

[4] There is no evidence that Llull was aware of or influenced by kabbalah, though speculation that he was a kabbalist dates back at least to Pico della Mirandola and the later Renaissance Pseudo-Llullian tradition which attributed countless works on alchemy, kabbalah, and magic to Llull. In any case, his system is by no means "primarily influenced" by kabbalah. Any attempt to identify parallels between the two systems, which are very different, inevitably shows an unfamiliarity with Llull, kabbalah, or both.

[5] Buck-Morss does believe it possible that Hegel was influenced by or familiar with Freemasonry, but does not claim that Hegel was himself a Mason, and these are in fact very different claims

[6] The exact typeface is from *Thomas E. Hill's Manual of Social and Business Forms* (Chicago: Hill Standard Book Co., 1893) and has no relation to Masonry whatsoever.

Islamic mathematics such as algebra, Jewish mystic texts, and Hermetic treatises" from medieval Arabic translation movements (pg. 20). Rather than being "well known" as she claims, it is actually an inversion of the traditional mainstream view – in which new translations from Greek, connected to the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453 and the exile of Greek scholars, which inaugurated the Renaissance and moved scholarly culture away from Arabic-based traditions and towards a 'rebirth' of classical philosophy from the 'original' sources.[7] This is a major lapse in Lagalisse's scholarship, as the image of the medieval world which she draws from is in many ways constructed by Renaissance scholars who were eager to separate themselves from the 'Gothic' past. In the medieval period, for Lagalisse, "man's wish to 'operate' on the world [...] was attributed to devilish inspiration" (pg. 29). There is no attribution for this claim and anyone familiar with medieval science knows this is deeply mischaracterized at best and plainly false at worst.[8]

Most perniciously, she opts for the long-discredited model of the early modern witch trials, in which "'witches' were generally no more than lay healers...proper empiricists" and therefore "witch hunts were a gendered class war wherein elite males forcibly took over both the conceptual and practical real of healing from peasant women". While the "fathers of science" were trying to "turn lead into gold", women healers were being persecuted as witches (pg. 30). She adopts this model wholesale from Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English, the former of whom was her academic advisor and who wrote the introduction to this very book. Lagalisse argues that

After all, as "magic" itself was gaining respect in certain elite quarters, women were being persecuted as witches precisely for practicing "magic," wherein we may observe that the perceived danger was not "magic" itself but the gender of its practitioner. While men's "operation" on the world was sanctioned, women's equivalent "operation" on the world was targeted as heresy.

To begin, the vast majority of women killed during the Early Modern witch trials simply were not lay healers.[9] The persistent myth with Lagalisse deploys is worrying not only because it is long discredited, but also because it ignores the racial and ethnic prejudice that conditioned the witch trials, something which should have been glaringly apparent to Lagalisse, who bookends *Occult Features* with discussions of antisemitism. In fact, the *Hammer of the Witches*, which she quotes, is preceded by the *Hammer of the Jews*! She is persistent in her use of the term "cabalist" without qualification – that is to say, ample references to mystical traditions of Judaism with little or no discussion of said traditions or why that term refers to secret societies in the first place. Her discussion of Spinoza makes no mention of his Sephardic Jewish ethnicity, only his "diverse and contested oeuvre" and influence on Freemasonry.[10]

Lagalisse argues that during the Enlightenment, the occult sciences were not "disqualified, but came to enjoy an increasingly acceptable, even revered, status due to connected advances in mathematics and related practical pursuits" (pg. 29). However, far from being "increasingly acceptable," magic was steeply contested and declining during this period, especially, but not solely, in Protestant Europe. In fact it is during this period that occultism *sensu stricto* comes about, by the excision of "rejected knowledge" from accepted scholarly culture. Renaissance magic, rather

[7] One of the seminal studies on the relationship of Eastern Greek Eurrope to Western Latin Europe is Deno Geanakoplos's *Interaction of the "Sibling" Byzantine and Western Cultures in the Middle Ages and Italian Renaissance (330-1600)*

[8] See, for example, Albertus Magnus' *Book of Stones*.

[9] Purkiss, Diane. *The witch in history: early modern and twentieth-century representations*. Routledge, 2003.

[10] Last Stone, Suzanne. "Spinzoa's Identity and Philosophy: Jewish or Otherwise?". *Cardozo Law Review* 25:2 (2003).

than being an elite practice, was largely underground and popular among all classes. It was an atmosphere where Reginald Scot can mention Catholics, Jewish mystics, and mythological figures in a single breath:[11]

> By the sound of the words nothing commeth, nothing goeth [...] neither all the conjurors, Cabalists, papists, soothsaiers, inchanters, witches, nor charmers in the world can adde such strength to God's workmanship, as to make anie thing anew, or else to exchange one thing into another.

It was common for these debates to form along Catholic-Protestant lines and to target Jews in particular, as in the above passage. Lagalisse simply appeals to a singular "Church" which did not exist in the time of the Early Modern witch trials (pg. 31).

Despite ample references to Giordano Bruno – footnotes to the great Frances Yates – she makes no reference to his trial and execution at the hands of the Inquisition in 1600.[12] Instead Lagalisse claims that Renaissance magicians were "consistently passed over" (pg. 32) by demonologists, which is simply false. Though dramatic executions carried out against Bruno were indeed rare, demonologists and inquisitors by no means 'passed over' Renaissance magicians: luminaries like Johannes Trithemius, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, and even Giambattista della Porta were all tried and in some cases had their works condemned and burned. Other magicians themselves were burned. There was often a racial component to trials of Renaissance magicians, like that carried out against an enslaved Egyptian, Sellem Bin al-Sheik Mansurn, in 1605.[13]

In short, Lagalisse collapses an incredibly complex atmosphere into a reductionist model dominated by gender, and to a lesser extent, economic class, ignoring significant and important questions of race, colonialism, and religious identity. In doing this she misrepresents her sources, makes egregious errors, or appeals to the outdated and long-discredited theories of her doctoral advisors.

European occultism has never been a singular body of doctrines: it is a heterogenous body of knowledge synthesized from a wide variety of sources, to appropriate Lagalisse, which "happened in the context of complex power relations". The historical object of European occultism, as constructed by historians and anthropologists, is largely the trace of actors normally excised from mainstream histories and indeed societies, as ossified in the upper echelons of European literary society. These actors – literary forgers, *Mudéjares*, folk healers, women, heretics, criminals, *Marranos*, the enslaved – can still be identified, albeit faintly and distorted, in the practices and writings of European esotericists.

Occult Features of *Occult Features*

Admittedly, while Lagalisse's historiography is laughable, this does not necessarily discredit her ultimate point: that anarchism's gendered, racial, and class character articulates within an occult cosmology that, 'behind the scenes' so to speak, still patterns leftist social movements

[11] Scot, Reginald. *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*. William Brome, 1584.

[12] Martinez, Alberto. "Giordano Bruno and the Heresy of Many Worlds". *Annals of Science* 23:4 (2016).

[13] Agius, Dionysius A., Alexander Mallett, and Catherine Rider, editors. *Magic in Malta: Sellem bin al-Sheikh Mansur and the Roman Inquisition, 1605*. Brill, 2022.

today. However, the real problem with this thesis is one of parsimony and causality. She misrepresents what is actually a universal feature of Western scholarly culture as a unique, or at least disproportionately influential, feature of anarchism. There is not anywhere in the sciences, human or natural, that is not touched by these same 'occult' features in ways that are equally as pertinent as in anarchism. Further, it is difficult to claim that anarchism's gendered, racial, and class character comes from this particular occult cosmology, instead of mirroring the structure of the society and culture it originates in. That is to say, the overall structure of society and culture characterizes both occultism and anarchism, and what Lagalisse portrays as a causal relationship is really a correlation.

In any case these same occult features are ever-present in Lagalisse's book. At times it is difficult to know whether she intends this, or genuinely does not grasp the irony. In either case, she never explicitly discusses it, even while the back cover describes how "hidden correspondences between anarchism, Renaissance magic, and New Age movements" influence anarchism today. The most obvious is her interpretation of leftist symbolism: Lagalisse sees hidden meaning in stars and circle-As, even when such meaning is clearly mistaken, as with the Gothic "plumbobs". But her overall method, genealogy, is itself nothing more than a reflection of the Pythagorean golden chain, in which the hidden operation of ancient ideas is transmitted from a *prisca theologia* down to contemporary philosophers. That this genealogy is meaningful, and not simply a record of irrelevant historical accidents, is necessarily esoteric. I am reminded of the geomantic tableaux, in which astrological correspondences (as divined by points made in the sand) are organized into families and lines of descent, and astrological influence traced through generations.

Indeed what is anthropology if not a continuation of the theological project to identify the precise nature of human being, rooted in the mystical anthropology of Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Ratramnus, Hadewijch, and countless others? What of the medieval ethnographers, who tie their reports of far-off races with the occult correspondences of stones? Lagalisse has stayed among us *kynokephaloi*, you see – she makes sure you know she listens to us, or rather, those who claim to be us.[14] Perhaps, if I were to assent to Lagalisse's thesis, I could argue that her own racial fetishization and philosemitism is due to being articulated within this occult cosmology, like the great Athanasius Kircher who meticulously studied Chinese, Coptic, and Nahuatl to show how they all preserved the Tetragrammaton; or how Leibniz saw *creatio ex nihil* in the binary numerals of the ☒☒ *Yijing*. I think it is far more pertinent, however, that Lagalisse is simply a white academic.

All this being said, I think that interrogating the esoteric roots of anarchism (or any other field) is enriching and often necessary. However, rather than illustrating what does not need to be illustrated (white men are going to be white men, for better or worse), I think it provides an interesting and productive avenue for unsettling and destabilizing our received histories of thought, in ways which go beyond rigid dualisms. Or something. Really, I just want this fucking review to be finished. I deal with white academics more than enough in my day to day life.

[14] The κῡνοκέφᾰλοι *kŭnoképhăloi* were a legendary race of dog-headed men who were said to live on the margins of the classical world in premodernity. Depictions of such monstrous races are the very earliest origin of anthropology, and figures like Augustine and Ratramnus debated and discussed whether they indeed were men or monsters.

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