On the Social Organisation of Rejected Knowledge: Reassessing the Sociology of the Occult

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If we come to perceive the occult revival of today not as an ephemeral fad of mass society but as an integral component in the formation of a new cultural matrix, more likely international than national in scope, if we see it, in brief, as an important vehicle in the restructuring of collective representations of social reality, we will see (with or without the third eye) the Age of Aquarius as a major sociological happening.


1 Introduction: Rejected Knowledge, Rejected Theory

Specialists have recently shown great interest in how “esotericism” as a historiographical category has emerged as a by-product of polemical encounters in early-modern European intellectual history. Wouter J. Hanegraaff has provided us with the standard story:¹ The basis of the category consists of anything that Protestant polemicists saw as “pagan superstitions” within the Christian fold, particularly those currents of philosophy and theology associated with ancient wisdom narratives looking favourably at Zarathustra, Hermes, or Plato. Enlightenment authors largely adopted the Protestant narrative, and expanded it to include new emerging superstitions deemed to conflict with rational thought. Eventually, these exclusionary practices gave rise to a whole genre of “compendia of folly”, in which early Christian heresies were conflated

with “magic”, “divination”, and “demonology”, the “occult sciences”, “talismans”, “fairies” and all manner of other “related subjects”.2

The notion that esotericism is a form of rejected knowledge is, however, not new. It has roots in historical and sociological scholarship of the early 1970s that tried to understand the forms of popular spirituality that spread with the counterculture of the post-war era. In 1971, the Scottish historian James Webb wrote that “the dichotomy of Underground and Establishment is one of the most important concepts to have emerged from recent social changes”, expressing amazement that “no historian has so far extended the terminology of the self-proclaimed Underground back in time to discover whether a historical continuity exists”.3 The nineteenth-century occult, Webb argued, was characterised precisely by an underground of “rejected knowledge” – that is, by “knowledge which is actively rejected by an Establishment culture, or knowledge which voluntarily exiles itself from the courts of favor because of its recognized incompatibility with the prevailing wisdom”.4

Parallel to Webb’s historical studies, sociologists like Edward Tiryakian,5 Marcello Truzzi,6 and Colin Campbell7 also linked their understanding of “the occult”, “esoteric”, or “cultic” to the notion of a culturally deviant “underground” of rejected knowledge, contrasted with the “establishment” and/or the “mainstream”. They were soon joined by sociologists of science, who studied the construction of rejected knowledge in the context of scientific disciplines,8 often focusing on esoteric topics such as astrology,9 mesmerism,10 spiritualism,11 parapsychology,12 and ufology.13

2 All these are examples from the J. S. Forsyth, Demonologia; or Natural Knowledge Revealed; being an exposé of Ancient and Modern Superstitions, Credulity, Fanaticism, Enthusiasm, & Imposture (1827). See discussion in Hanegraaff, Esotericism and the Academy, 232-234.
4 Ibid., 191; my emphases.
Historians of esotericism sometimes acknowledge that this literature exists, but extended discussions are rare and usually dismissive. Indeed, the received view of what has come to be known as the “sociology of the occult” holds that it is reductionist, anti-esoteric, and ahistorical, dismissing its subject matter as an irrational and ultimately insignificant phenomenon. This 1970s research programme did suffer from obvious flaws, not least in its definitions and poor historical grounding. Yet, the purpose of the present article is to demonstrate that the received view of the sociology of the occult is wrong, and that we can still learn from it. More than setting the record straight, my main objective is to show that a constructive rereading of the literature has a lot to contribute to current developments in our field. There is a tendency in our field to leave central concepts such as “rejected knowledge” go undertheorised, with the result that what seems like sound explanations and clear definitions are not so precise on closer inspection. Since the sociology of the occult dealt with many of the same problems as we are facing today, my approach is to mine the earlier literature for useful theoretical resources and integrate them with existing frameworks and objectives.

I will begin by reassessing the sociology of the occult in light of the criticisms that have typically been marshalled against it (Section 2). A closer reading finds much of it to miss the mark, and I will therefore replace the received view with my own summary of the literature’s most salient aspects. In the following section (3) I will proceed to mine the literature for theoretical resources that are particularly useful for present challenges. I recognise four such challenges, concerning the historicity, substance, social significance, and social organisation of rejected knowledge. Finally, I conclude (section 4)

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with a discussion of how these resources may help us refine our view of the social dimensions of rejected knowledge. Important challenges to the suggested models will be considered, before ending on a constructive note by suggesting a diachronic, sociologically informed historical research project focused on the shifting transactional networks of “underground” milieus.

2 The Case Against the Sociology of the Occult: Reductionism, Anti-Esotericism, and the Preclusion of Historicity

The sharpest case against the sociology of the occult was penned by Hanegraaff in a series of publications in the 1990s.¹⁷ This critique has since been repeated by other scholars, the present author included,¹⁸ usually with reference to Hanegraaff rather than to the sociological literature itself. The critique focuses on two key authors, Edward Tiryakian and Marcello Truzzi, and raises three major criticisms: that the sociology of the occult is reductionist, driven by an anti-esoteric agenda, and that it precludes historical research. Of these, I consider the third critique to be the most relevant and also the most damaging if taken to be true. I will therefore give priority to demonstrating that the sociology of the occult is not only compatible with historical research, but invites it.

Reductionism and Anti-Esotericism

In an influential article that intervened in the old religionism debate of the 1980s/1990s, Hanegraaff characterised the sociology of the occult as “the most important example of reductionism in the study of esotericism”.¹⁹ Seeing that “reductionism” in this context means little more than a willingness to adopt explanatory theories in order to account for religious or esoteric phenomena in material, human, or social terms,²⁰ as opposed to accepting these phenomena on their own terms (religionism) or ceding all such explanatory ambition for the sake of staying as

metaphysically neutral as possible (“empiricism”, in Hanegraaff’s terms), the reductionism charge is also the least controversial of the three. The question is not whether or not “reductionism” in this explanatory, hypothesis-driven sense characterises the sociology of the occult (it clearly does), but whether or not one accepts this as a problem in the first place. The sociologists did not, and neither do I.

The reductionism charge has, however, also been connected to the claim that the sociologists’ motivations were anti-esoteric. It is not just that the scholars sought to explain the occult in material terms, but that their very objective in doing so was to delegitimise it. It is possible to create this impression by focusing solely on Marcello Truzzi, who, besides being a sociologist was also a founding member in 1976 of the American sceptics’ organisation, the Committee for the Scientific Investigations of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP). However, leaving it at that gives the wrong impression: in fact, Truzzi quickly disaffiliated from CSICOP due to what he considered its unscientific and dogmatic approach, and instead founded a new journal, the Zetetic Scholar, in 1978. In a direct reaction to CSICOP, Truzzi’s journal aimed to “create a continuing dialogue between proponents and critics of claims of the paranormal”, and proclaimed itself to be “interested not only in adjudication of the claims but with the sociology and psychology of the disputes themselves” – that is, in the academic study of how “the occult” is handled in society, particularly as a topos of polemics. The Zetetic Scholar is, in fact, of some interest to scholars of esotericism; the first issue carried reviews of Webb’s Occult Underground (by the mathematician and sceptic Martin Gardener) and R. Laurence Moore’s In Search of White Crows (by Truzzi), as well as a short review by the pioneering Scientology scholar, Roy Wallis, which can be considered part of the early scholarly rebukes against the anti-cult movement’s “brainwashing” claims (in this case focused on Ronald Enroth, Youth Brainwashing and the Extremist Cults). It was also in an editorial to this journal that Truzzi, in 1987, proposed the term

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“pseudo-skepticism” for those debunkers who meet all claims to the paranormal with *denial* rather than with *doubt*. Even in his sceptical activity, then, I read Truzzi as motivated not by an anti-esoteric agenda, but by a genuine concern for a properly scientific, empirical, and agnostic (in the original Huxleyan sense) attitude toward all claims to knowledge.

**Deviance, Historicity, and Social Significance**

The central complaint, however, concerns the fact that theorists like Truzzi and Tiryakian conceived of the occult in terms of intellectual and religious *deviance*, and that this focus not only betrayed an underlying anti-esotericism (i.e., that the occult is by necessity in conflict with sound opinion), but also an ahistorical point of departure that can only lead to anachronisms and distortions if applied to historical research. Indeed, as I myself claimed in 2013: “the main problem of these sociological constructs of ‘the occult’ [as deviance] is precisely their neglect, and *preclusion*, of historicity”.

I now believe that this affirmation of the received view was wrong. A close reading of the sources makes the charge of an incompatibility with historical approaches difficult to maintain. To begin with, “deviance” plays different roles in the theoretical models of the key authors. Truzzi, for example, prefers to speak about “anomalous” rather than “deviant” claims, and casts it as a multi-faceted analytical construct for looking at how different knowledge claims relate to each other and to social factors, and how such relationships shift over time as well as between different social groups. As I will argue in the next section, Truzzi’s view does not preclude historical approaches, but rather invites them: historicisation is how one traces the construction of deviance.

Something similar can be said for Tiryakian. While he too is concerned with the deviant status of the esoteric, he does not *define* the category that way. Instead, he defines “esoteric culture” in positive terms, and explains its deviant status as a secondary trait resulting from historically contingent processes that have pushed certain types of knowledge “underground”.

In fact, the very agenda of the sociology of the occult as Tiryakian conceived of it was to study the role that esotericism has played in major cultural changes in Western

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27 See Truzzi, “Definition and Dimensions of the Occult”, 637
history. As he put it in the introduction to On the Margins of the Visible (1974), perhaps the major collective achievement that this short-lived research tradition produced:

A comprehensive investigation of the esoteric tradition, that seemingly archaic side of Western culture, can, we believe, shed much light on major sources of ideational change in the structure of Western society, changes at the core of collective representations of physical and social reality.

The received view holds that sociologists like Tiryakian saw nothing but a “futile reaction” in the youth movement’s embrace of the occult. To the contrary, I submit that Tiryakian’s theory attempted to integrate “the occult” as an active element in sociocultural change. “The occult revival” of the 1960s and 1970s was cast as a socially significant phenomenon, capable of shaping people’s values and preferences, and thereby transforming the dominant establishment culture. Moreover, the current revival was only one of a number of similar historical events. It is worth quoting Tiryakian at some length to see just how enthusiastic he was about this historically recurring transformative potential of the esoteric:

Perhaps now is the period when we shall witness a new cultural paradigm replacing the one that may have spent its creative energy. And perhaps it is the esoteric tradition that will again come to the fore of the visible and act as a new booster. If the “right path” of the esoteric tradition is followed, it may be possible for the new cultural paradigm to realize a synthesis of science and religion, since the esoteric tradition has channels to both. Without it, the “Weberian dilemma” will become even more accentuated, the dilemma of the “iron cage” of modern, depersonalized society: mechanized petrification or blind following of false prophets.

Here, Tiryakian comes across not as an anti-esotericist, but as another of the countercultural intellectuals who, starting from a Weberian critique of modernity, has come around to a radical call for “re-enchantment” through the merger of science and religion. While I am not suggesting that we should now sort Tiryakian with figures like

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28 Tiryakian, “Preliminary Considerations”, 2.
29 See e.g. Hanegraaff, Western Esotericism, 9.
30 For a review of the sociological work on “the occult revival” of the period 1968-1972, see Tiryakian, “Toward the Sociology of Esoteric Culture”, 492-496.
31 Tiryakian, “Preliminary Considerations”, 12.
32 Cf. Egil Asprem, The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse, 1900–1939 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 54-67. Tiryakian corresponded with some of the intellectual icons of the 1960s counterculture, including Joseph Campbell – as can be seen from his papers that have been made public by
Alan Watts, Fritjof Capra, or Morris Berman, I will show that his theory does imply the socially transformative power of esoteric knowledge.

Towards a More Nuanced Picture: Five Tenets of the Sociology of the Occult

The above discussion suffices to show that the received view does not accurately portray the sociology of the occult’s research programme. What, then, were its basic objectives? Drawing on a broader literature that includes a range of authors beyond Truzzi and Tiryakian, such as Andrew M. Greeley, Martin Marty, Claude Fischler, and Colin Campbell, I suggest that we can identify five broadly shared tenets:

1) The Establishment/Underground distinction. The distinction itself is a social universal (exists in all large societies); “the occult”, in so far as it represents knowledge rejected by establishment institutions, is today part of the socioculturally deviant underground.

2) Rejection of the deprivation thesis. Occult involvement is not explained by low socio-economic status or lack of education: Instead, a consistent empirical finding of the sociology of the occult was that involvement in the occult is primarily associated with the educated middle class. Practitioners typically live in cities, are white-collar workers, and/or college students. A key objective of the programme was to explain why, and explore the long-term consequences for the development of religion in the West.

3) The occult is socially significant. Occult systems of belief and practice may be socioculturally deviant (i.e. belong to an underground), but they are nevertheless capable of shaping the values and social actions of those who embrace them.

Duke University. For an overview, see https://www.libraries.psu.edu/findingaids/6521.htm, I have not had the opportunity to consult these letters for the present paper.

33 Andrew M. Greeley, “Implications for the Sociology of Religion of Occult Behavior in the Youth Culture”, Youth and Society 2 (1970), 131-140.


36 Colin Campbell, "The Cult, the Cultic Milieu, and Secularisation", A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain 5 (1972), 119-136; Campbell, "The Secret Religion of the Educated Classes", Sociological Analysis 39.2 (1978), 146-156. My inclusion of Campbell may appear surprising; see, however, the argument in section 3 below.


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Theorising the occult’s social effects was therefore a key objective of the sociology of the occult.\(^{38}\)

4) *The mid-twentieth-century “occult revival” is not a unique event.* The visibility and impact of ideas circulating in the underground tends, from time to time through history, to reappear “from the margins of the visible”. Theorising these episodes was a major theoretical objective, forging a necessary link with history.

5) *The Underground plays a crucial role in cultural innovation.* The dominant explanation for the observation in point four was that the occult’s long-term historical function is as an agent of cultural change and renewal, especially in times of crisis/anomie.\(^{39}\)

These five points constitute major assumptions, heuristics, and hypotheses of the sociology of the occult. In addition, individual authors emphasise a range of more specific questions, such as the relation between deviance and content, what draws people toward the occult, what organisational forms arise around occult claims, how claims are legitimated vis-à-vis Establishment society, and the internal, social differentiation of the underground itself and the hierarchies and prestige systems that come into play. We should also note the variety of opinion on how these questions are to be answered. When it comes to organisational forms and distribution, for example, Tiryakian emphasised a tendency towards secrecy and elitism whereas Truzzi and Marty, while not denying the elitist, underground basis of the occult, focused primarily on its mass appeal and rapprochement with popular culture. Moreover, Truzzi and Marty both suggested that the mass appeal of the occult can be explained by trivial factors, such as its entertainment value or its perceived instrumental utility, while Greeley, Staude, and Tiryakian all emphasised a deeper attraction in the occult’s opposition against “what is perceived as ‘Establishment’ mentality”, including “the oppressive ‘technocracy’”, socio-economic “alienation”, and the “depersonalization of

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\(^{38}\) Some of Truzzi’s work (i.e. “The Occult Revival as Popular Culture”) is an exception to this point, as he has argued for what might be called a “dilution thesis”. The massive popular appeal of “the occult” does not represent a surge in serious concern with “occult phenomena” (i.e., such that one would fear being haunted by demons, targeted by witchcraft, or doomed by an omen in the stars) but rather a sign of disenchantment through the trivialization of the occult as innocent entertainment. If people sincerely believed in demons and ghosts, Truzzi argued, they would not actively seek them out. It should be noted that this focus on trivialisation was toned down considerably in his more systematic theoretical article on “Definitions and Dimensions” of the occult, first published in 1971.

\(^{39}\) E.g. Tiryakian, “Toward the Sociology of Esoteric Culture”, 510; Campbell, “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu, and Secularization.”
the industrial order”.40 Behind these claims lie a difference in theoretical orientations, with Tiryakian representing a structural-functionalist wing that explains the persistence and significance of the esoteric underground in terms of the functions it performs for a culture’s ability to renew itself, and Truzzi representing a more constructionist, sociology of knowledge-oriented camp, interested in how knowledge claims are embedded in power and competition for prestige and legitimacy, especially on the actor’s level. Both camps, as I will suggest in the following section, have something to offer our theorising of rejected knowledge today.

3 Mining the Literature: A Reassessment of Theoretical Resources

When read constructively, the sociology of the occult can help advance our current notion of esotericism as rejected knowledge on several fronts. Specifically, I suggest it can contribute to four areas that have been flagged as problems with the rejected knowledge thesis:41 (I) the historicity of rejected knowledge; (II) the substantial features of esotericism so explained; (III) the social significance of rejected knowledge; and (IV) the social organisation of rejected knowledge. I will address the first two points together, focusing on Truzzi’s notion of “anomalies”. Point III will be addressed by looking closer at the theoretical underpinnings of Tiryakian’s arguments in the structural functionalist social theory of Talcott Parsons. Finally, point IV is best assessed by linking the “classic” sociologists of the occult with Campbell’s more favourably received “cultic milieu” model.

(I-II) The Historicity and Substantial Features of the Occult

Truzzi’s focus on anomalies has been construed as precluding historical research, but this has only been possible by overlooking a very central aspect of his approach: namely his insistence that looking at labelling practices is integral to researching the occult. From the very outset, he wrote, researchers must ask “who is labelling the beliefs as occult, where the labelling is being done (the social context), and at what time the designation is made (the historical period)”.42 These questions can be asked irrespective

41 For these challenges, see especially Marco Pasi, “The Problems of Rejected Knowledge: Thoughts on Wouter Hanegraaff’s Esotericism and the Academy”, Religion 43.2 (2013), 201-212; Michael Stausberg, “What is it all about? Some reflections on Wouter Hanegraaff’s Esotericism and the Academy”, Religion 43.2 (2013), 219-230; Olav Hammer, “Deconstructing”.
42 Truzzi, “Definition and Dimensions”, 637, emphases added.
of how the occult is defined. Indeed, the best way to read Truzzi’s article is as the outlines of a research programme for how to study “the occult” rather than a statement of “what it is”; that is to say, his article is more important for the questions it asks than the definitions it tentatively offers. In fact, Truzzi dismissed the possibility of coming up with a satisfactory definition, and instead suggested five dimensions of “the occult” that scholars ought to question and investigate empirically. Namely:

1) The substance of occult belief: What is alleged to be known?
2) The source of the occult – and the label: Who claims to know it, and who labels it as “occult”, for what reasons?43
3) The authority of occult claims: How does the claimant justify their claim?
4) The source of occult knowledge: Where, and under what conditions, do they learn the knowledge – and is the belief maintained over time?
5) The functions of occultism: what use does occult knowledge have in believers’ lives?

While I think one cannot do all of these things without letting go of “the occult” as an analytical concept,44 this remains an excellent list of problem areas that apply equally to the study of esotericism in its current incarnation. Today, the rejected knowledge thesis primarily asks questions one and two: what sorts of knowledge are being rejected as “heterodox”, “pagan”, or “irrational”, and who is doing the rejection? In extension of this, many scholars have been interested in the third question: how claims are legitimated and authority constructed.45 The questions of where and how people learn occult knowledge, and what this knowledge may mean to them, have however gone largely unexplored, despite the fact that they are crucial to understanding how socialisation

43 These two levels at which the question “who” can be asked – namely, who claims the occult knowledge, and who claims the knowledge is occult? – are both discussed in Truzzi’s article, but conflated in his list of dimensions.
44 Instead, I hold that the appropriate attitude is to reverse-engineer the concept. In that perspective, the multifaceted concept of “anomaly”, discussed at some length below, might be a good candidate for a “building block” of “the occult” as a discursive phenomenon. See Asprem, “Reverse-Engineering Esotericism: How to Prepare a Complex Cultural Concept for the Cognitive Science of Religion”, Religion 46.2 (2016).
45 The best example of this approach is Olav Hammer, Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age (Leiden: Brill, 2001).
works within self-identified occultism. I will return to this in a later section on the social structure of rejected knowledge.

The issue that most concerned Truzzi was, however, the relationship between the rejected status and the substantial content of rejected knowledge. Esotericism researchers are struggling with the same problem. The current answer on offer is that intellectual establishments did not reject knowledge arbitrarily, but rather deployed specific heresiological criteria concerning the eternity of the world and salvation without divine grace. This has provided some coherence of content in the domain of esoteric rejected knowledge, converging around a notion of “philosophical paganism”. This approach is strictly historicist, in that it looks for a particular historical cause for a particular historical outcome. Truzzi’s approach differs, in that it asks a theoretically deeper question: are there socio-cognitive aspects that make certain kinds of knowledge more likely to be understood as “occult” overall?

This is where the anomalous comes into play. Truzzi holds that anomalousness is a necessary but not a sufficient criterion for something to be labelled “occult”, by any social actor, and stresses that the anomaly is a relative concept. Truzzi makes three sets of distinctions in order to map out a whole range of different conditions under which various sorts of knowledge claims can be classified as anomalous by some observers but not others: general vs. theoretical anomalies; object anomalies vs. process anomalies; and isolated vs. integrated anomalies.

The first distinction is the most crucial, because it pinpoints the different degrees of culture-specific and specialist learning required. A “general anomaly is one which

46 The most notable exceptions to date are found in the research on esoteric popular culture as a socialising force. Researchers of modern Satanism have developed this point; see for example Asbjørn Dyrendal, “Devilish Consumption: Popular Culture in Satanic Socialization”, Numen 55 (2008), 68-98. See also Partridge’s argument about occulture; e.g. Partridge, “Occulture is Ordinary”, in Contemporary Esotericism, eds. Asprem and Granholm (London: Routledge, 2014).

47 See also Asprem, The Problem of Disenchantment, 423-424.

48 Criticism against Truzzi’s concept of the anomalous has in my view tended not to hit the mark. For example, Robert Galbreath (“Explaining Modern Occultism”, in The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives, ed. Howard Kerr and Charles L. Crow (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 15) criticises it as not being “satisfactory as a general definition” of the occult for its failure to “specify both the criteria for inclusion in the occult and the characteristics of its modernity”. This overlooks the fact that Truzzi is not defining the occult as “anomalies”, but merely suggesting that phenomena perceived under certain specified conditions as “anomalous” also tend to be labelled (by practitioners as well as outsiders) as “occult” in specified situations. Ironically, Galbreath himself provides a definition stating that “occult matters thus characterized are also anomalous (although not all anomalies are occult); that is, they are widely regarded, often by critics and adherents alike, as not fitting into, and perhaps also directly critical of, the prevailing interpretations of science, historical scholarship, and ‘common sense’” (Galbreath, “Explaining”, 19), a statement that all but echoes Truzzi ten years earlier.
most people within a given culture would, under most circumstances, consider a strange or incredible event, e.g., an object vanishing into or appearing from nowhere”, while a theoretical anomaly “appears unusual only to one with special knowledge or training”. This distinction is crucial, in that it highlights the different degrees to which anomalies rely on systems of expertise. “General anomalies” include phenomena that violate near-universal expectations that are grounded in humanity’s evolved perceptual and cognitive apparatus; a good example is the notion of “counterintuitiveness” studied by the cognitive science of religion, e.g. solid objects that pass through each other, non-biological objects that move on their own accord, or persons that are invisible. But the general type also includes phenomena that break with cultural expectations that are so widely shared that they become unquestioned assumptions. Many ethical and social codes are like this: thus, not wanting to marry, wanting to marry someone of the same sex, or wanting to change one’s sex, have all been “anomalous” social phenomena in most western societies until quite recently.50

While general anomalies do not require any specialist knowledge to be perceived as anomalous within a given culture, theoretical anomalies can only be perceived from the vantage of some expert system.51 Thus, a healing practice such as homeopathy will seem anomalous to a medical doctor (it violates basic scientific knowledge), but not necessarily to the general population, which only sees two health professionals who both flash degrees, use technical terms, and prescribe medications that claim to heal. Conversely, a physical phenomenon that appears anomalous to the general public, say, the appearance of a second sun on the horizon, may be fascinating, but not anomalous, to a physicist knowledgeable about optics. Following this logic, we can also see how motivations for labelling some phenomenon “occult” may also differ for various groups: The GP might dismiss homeopathy as “occult” in the derogatory sense while homeopaths and their clients insist it is merely an “alternative” medical practice that deserves mainstream acceptance. People in the contemporary conspirituality scene might take a “double sun” observation as truly anomalous and “therefore” evidence of

49 Truzzi, “Definition and Dimensions”, 638; my italics.
50 In the cognitive science of religion’s terminology, these would be considered counter-schematic rather than counter-intuitive phenomena – that is, violating learned cultural models rather than biologically based intuitions.
51 The notion of expertise has received much attention in the sociology of scientific knowledge over the past decade, as part of the so-called “third wave” in science and technology studies. See, e.g., Harry Collins and Robert Evans (eds.), Rethinking Expertise (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Colins, Are We All Scientific Experts Now? (Wiley, 2014).
the occult knowledge that the planet Nibiru is on a collision course with Earth – whereas scientists will dismiss its occult nature by explaining the phenomenon as nothing but an atmospheric illusion.52

Truzzi further subdivides anomalies into objects vs. processes, and isolated vs. integrated anomalies. The object-process distinction is between “some thing or event which is somehow a deviation from the usual order of things” – such as abominable snowmen, UFOs, or a levitating fakir – and “quite ordinary things in some extraordinary conjunction”, typically involving “the inference of some strange causalities”.53 Examples of the latter might include notions of astrological influence, synchronicities, or conspiracy theories in which a large chain of mundane events are seen as pointing to some unusual agency. Finally, the isolated-integrated distinction concerns whether a claim about an anomalous process or object occurs in isolation or in conjunction with other anomaly claims. On the social level, this lets us distinguish between people who are interested only in some specific anomaly – say, UFOs – and those who inhabit a worldview of anomalies, where UFOs are integrated with a belief in extraterrestrial beings who watch over our planet and can be contacted by telepathic links or channelling techniques.

Truzzi’s distinctions are undertheorised, but can be developed and updated by drawing on recent work in the sociology of knowledge (particularly the sociology of expertise) on the one hand, and the cognitive science of religion on the other.54 Even in their original form, Truzzi’s questions point in fruitful directions because they let us hypothesise about patterns of distribution of cultural elements bearing specific traits, including their likelihood of being deemed “occult” in the first place. For example, while all of the anomaly types can be documented empirically within the self-proclaimed “occult”, Truzzi observes that “an integrated set of anomalous processes which are contrary to general experiences are most unequivocally called occult,” whereas belief in


53 Truzzi, “Definition and Dimensions”, 637; emphases added

“theoretically isolated anomalous objects is least likely to be thus labeled by most occultists”\(^{55}\) Today, the movement channelling messages from Ashtar Command could exemplify the former, while the bizarre observations of “Tabby’s Star” (formally known as KIC 8462852), which prompted normally sober astrophysicists to talk of an “alien megastructure” in 2015, is an example of the latter.\(^{56}\) The advantage of Truzzi’s methodological apparatus is that it lets us generate fairly specific hypothesis, such as this, which can be tested empirically.

Truzzi’s terms also shed light on the rejected knowledge thesis in esotericism research. If we grant the story of how the rejection process got underway from the basis of two specific heresiological criteria, what we are dealing with is the attempt of knowledge specialists (theologians) to look for *theoretically isolated anomalies*. What has happened later, however, is that these anomalies have been integrated with other ones, some of a general nature and others of a theoretical one, to create first the notion of a chain of connected heresies, and later as a pool of “suppressed” knowledge from which occultists can draw inspiration. Truzzi’s distinctions and dimensions make it possible to reconstruct this piecemeal construction of rejected knowledge in more precise terms, with a view to the social situatedness of those who make the connections.

(III) The Social Significance of Rejected Knowledge: The Structural-Functionalist Foundations of (Some) Sociology of the Occult

A variety of partially conflicting theoretical assumptions coexist in the sociology of the occult. Besides Truzzi’s eclectic approach, tinged by social constructionism and cognitive psychology, the most dominant trend has been a form of structural functionalism. While the former looks at how the occult is created in the social negotiation of knowledge claims, the latter seeks to explain it as (part of) a persistent feature of society that, moreover, contributes something to society’s proper functioning. This line of thinking is heavily influenced by Talcott Parsons, and is most clearly visible in the writings of

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\(^{55}\) Truzzi, “Definition and Dimensions”, 639; emphases added.

\(^{56}\) Solving puzzles around this latter type of anomalies is crucial to the normal functioning of science. At the time of writing, the best explanation for the star’s curious, long-term dimming patterns is considered to be a bit more prosaic: an orbiting cloud of dust. See e.g. Mike Wall, “New Observations Deepen Mystery of ‘Alien Megastructure’ Star”, *Scientific American* October 5 (2017), url: https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/new-observations-deepen-mystery-of-ldquo-alien-megastructure-rdquo-star/ (accessed Feb 2, 2018).
Tiryakian, who was one of Parsons’ graduate students. As far as I am aware, this theoretical heritage has not previously been commented on, yet it is a central underpinning of arguments that the occult is a socially significant phenomenon.

Focusing on Tiryakian, we should first note that his preferred term is not “the occult”, but rather “esoteric culture”. The use of “culture” is, as we shall soon see, significant. We should also note that he does not define esoteric culture negatively in terms of deviance, but substantially, in terms of beliefs, practices, and social organisation. The belief dimension covers “secret knowledge of the reality of things, of hidden truths”, while the practice dimension concerns “intentional practices, techniques, or procedures” that draw upon these postulated “hidden and concealed forces in nature or the cosmos”. The social dimension, finally, focuses on secrecy, initiations, and the limited transmission of “esoteric knowledge”.

Tiryakian has rightly been criticised for this substantial definition, which is so narrow that few historical examples fit. It is also problematic that it remains connected to a structural-functional definition, by which esoteric culture is opposed to exoteric culture. In what follows, I will ignore the question of substance and focus only on how Tiryakian handles the functional relationships. His definition of exoteric culture is arguably more important to us in this respect than his definition of esoteric culture: it is “[t]he cultural paradigm which is manifest in public institutions, a set of cognitive and evaluative orientations publically recognized and legitimated in the network of social institutions”.

The deviant status of esoteric culture at present is entirely contingent on the historical processes by which these public institutions have marginalised it. Rather than a watertight separation, we must imagine a constant flow of ideas between the esoteric and the exoteric. Indeed, as Tiryakian explicitly states, esoteric ideas have shaped the exoteric to a considerable degree, creating paradoxical tensions between the two cultures when viewed historically:

much of what is modern, even the ideology of modernization at its source, has originated in esoteric culture; paradoxically, the value orientation of Western exoteric society, embodied in

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57 Truzzi, by contrast, explicitly dismissed the question of the occult’s overall social function as meaningless, precisely because of the relative nature of what passes as “occult”. Instead he suggested looking at the strategic and situated functions it might serve for individuals. See Truzzi, “Definition and Dimensions”, 643.

58 Tiryakian, “Toward the Sociology of Esoteric Culture”, 498.

59 Ibid.
rationalism, the scientific ethos, and industrialism, has forced esoteric culture into the role of a marginal or underground movement. That is, modern Western civilization (dating back to the Renaissance and Reformation) has increasingly given to esoteric culture the mantle of a counterculture, while at the same time coopting many of its values and products.\(^{60}\)

Tiryakian’s conception is strongly inspired by Frances Yates’ master narrative of a “hermetic tradition” at the roots of modernity, as careful attention to his footnotes reveals.\(^{61}\) Tiryakian’s story is that of a historical current which has been deeply influential on modern culture, but retrospectively given “the mantle of a counterculture” by the establishment institutions it helped shape.

Key to Tiryakian’s understanding is that esoteric culture possesses a power to transform society even in periods when it is considered deviant. To understand this, we must appreciate the central role of Parsons’ structural functionalism in his argument. The influence is most explicit in that Tiryakian borrows a definition of “culture” as an “integral component of systems of social action” from Parsons. More tacitly, he draws on Parsons’ model of society as divided into four functional subsystems, each solving some existential problem for the social system as a whole. The four subsystems are often abbreviated “AGIL”, standing for the four functional problems with which they are concerned:

A: “Adaptation” to an environment; represented chiefly by the economy, understood as concerned with extraction and allocation of resources.

G: “Goal-attainment”; setting priorities and coordinating actions to achieve goals; identified primarily with the political realm.

I: “Integration”; concerned with the cooperation and harmonious cohabitation between groups; associated primarily with the legal system.

L: “Latency” or “latent pattern-maintenance”; concerned with maintaining shared values and motivations for actions, and primarily associated with cultural, educational, and religious institutions.\(^{62}\)

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 502

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 507, 509-510

The idea is that a society must solve problems related to all these four areas in order to survive and thrive. It must produce sustenance and energy in a sustainable manner (A), be able to allocate these resources in an effective and beneficial way (G), which requires cooperation and trust between individuals and groups (I) and a common understanding of the values that underpin priorities, decision-making, and social actions (L).

Tiryakian associates esoteric culture precisely with “the latency subsystem of Western society”: In his view, esoteric culture is a largely hidden and alternative “cultural paradigm which provides leverage against the institutionalized paradigm [i.e., against “exoteric culture”], hence function[ing] as a seat of inspiration for new systems of social action”. In plainer terms, the coexistence of the esoteric underground with the exoteric establishment means that the latter’s discontents can always turn to the former for inspiration and revitalisation. It is not just that the establishment pushes certain ideas and practise underground; the establishment is itself constantly under pressure from a seething esoteric culture that poses a latent challenge to the norms, values, and institutions currently enforced. “Alternative” ways of life, communes, spiritual practices, and all the rest, provide a constant reminder that solutions other than the established ones are possible. In this sense, the esoteric becomes a “seed-bed cultural source of change and wide-ranging innovations in art, politics, and even science.”

I do not wish to suggest a return to Parsonian social theory – nor that Tiryakian’s model is a good fit with historical data. I have merely sought to demonstrate that, by overlooking this central theoretical context, the received view of the sociology of the occult has missed something important: that these “reductionist” scholars were trying to answer questions about esotericism’s role in history and society that current scholarship is barely asking. Most notably this concerns the long-term relationship between rejected knowledge and the establishments that do the rejection. While Tiryakian did see the “occult revival” that unfolded around him as a resurfacing of “rejected knowledge”, he tried to explain it as an example of a recurrent type of historical event. It was not merely an “irrational” reaction caused by social anxieties, but symptomatic of a social system in the process of renewing itself by drinking from its underground cultural reservoirs. Even if we reject the grand functionalist explanation (as I think we should), we must appreciate what Tiryakian and colleagues are really

64 Ibid., 508.
saying: that the ability to *store* rejected knowledge in an esoteric underground, that is, to have a *social milieu* which acts as a societal memory for that which has been stigmatised and pushed out, is a feature that improves a society’s ability to avoid cultural stagnation, to renew itself, and to develop better-functioning values and motivations in response to rapidly changing economic, political, or juridical circumstances.65 Put plainly: occultism is good for a society’s long-term health.

*(IV) The Social Organisation of Rejected Knowledge: The Cultic Milieu*

This leads us to a final undertheorised element of the rejected knowledge thesis: The simple fact that “rejected knowledge” must continue to be communicated, shared, and enacted in various ways in order not to become simply *forgotten* knowledge. Some form of social organisation must emerge, which allows people to learn about the rejected knowledge, attach significance to it, and act on it.

A useful model is provided by Colin Campbell’s influential notion of the “cultic milieu”.66 In fact, we can see the cultic milieu concept – which scholars of esotericism have been much more eager to accept67 – as *conterminous* with the sociology of the occult. Notably, Campbell’s model summarises, synthesises, and develops all of the five shared tenets listed in section 2 above: the underground/establishment dynamic, the rejection of the deprivation model, the social significance of the occult, its historical aspect, and its functional role in cultural renewal. The cultic milieu is “the occult underground” by another name.

Like other sociologists of the occult, Campbell hypothesises that the cultic milieu is “a major agency of cultural ‘innovation’”, that it “functions as a ‘negative reference group’ for spokesmen of cultural orthodoxy”, that it flourishes in relation to “the disintegration of dominant indigenous culture”, and that it is a “source of renewal for ailing orthodox belief systems”.68 In what can be seen as a development of Tiryakian’s functionalist argument, Campbell finds that the cultic milieu “functions as a ‘gene pool’

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65 That conditions for these other subsystems (economy, governance, law) were rapidly changing in post-war America is without doubt; one only needs to think about the post-war economic boom, the baby boom, the civil rights movement and its associated social unrest to see how suddenly and how seriously the old latency subsystem was falling apart.
66 See Campbell, “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu, and Secularization”.
for society” as a whole, “enhancing society’s potential for cultural adaptation”. In addition to these shared points, he also hypothesises that the cultic milieu facilitates “the accommodation of ‘alien’ cultural items into a host culture”, and that “the amount of ‘alien’ culture contact” is a factor in the milieu’s ability to flourish. This latter point makes the prediction that esotericists are likely to be early adopters of foreign religions – a prediction which recent historical scholarship on esotericism’s global entanglements is starting to back up with solid evidence.

The elegance of Campbell’s classic article lies in how it derives a number of sharp hypotheses from the core feature of “societal deviance”. The cultic milieu is “the cultural underground of society”, and can be defined as “the sum of unorthodox and deviant belief-systems together with their practices, institutions and personnel”. Both the scope of substantial content and the socially unifying factors of the milieu are derived from its deviant status. As to contents, the milieu is “bounded by a religion-science axis and an instrumental-expressive axis, taking for granted the prior criterion of societal deviancy”. “Deviant science” mixes with “deviant religion”, with the former becoming more prominent as scientific establishments are replacing religious ones as the main purveyors of proper knowledge. Besides its oppositional character vis-à-vis society’s incumbent authorities, however, little more can be said about the nature of this content.

More can be said about the milieu’s social structure. The cultic milieu is not simply an unstructured wastebasket, but rather a network of individuals, small-scale organisations, and publishers through which rejected knowledge is shared and developed. Again, it is deviance that explains the cohesiveness of the milieu: it “constitutes a unity by virtue of a common consciousness of deviant status”. An attitude of “mutual sympathy and support” between otherwise disparate cultural systems arise from the need to legitimise oneself against the same perceived “orthodoxies”. Thus, from shared deviance (or at the very least a shared self-perception

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69 Ibid. I mean this figuratively: There is no cross-references between the two articles, which were published in parallel in 1972.
71 Ibid., 122.
72 Ibid., 124. Campbell does not spell out the exact meaning of the expressive/instrumental divide, but we should note that this is another central feature of Parsons sociology. For Parsons, it was most notably (and controversially) used to explain gender roles in functional terms within family units: females are more suitable for “affective” labour, while men tend to take on “instrumental” work outside the home. In a wider sense, the “expressive” includes cultural symbols (the latency dimension) that motivate and legitimise social action.
73 Campbell, “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu, and Secularization”, 134.
74 Ibid., 122.
of being deviant) arises a shared set of sociocultural goals, which have led to the creation of an overlapping communication structure of magazines, journals, zines, publishers, lectures, and workshops, in which knowledge is shared and positioned in varying degrees of opposition against “mainstream” or “establishment” attitudes. This structure, in turn, produces pressures to *syncretisation* between deviant ideas and practices, as individuals are presented with a broad range of cultural elements while moving through the network. With no central authority that polices doctrines across the milieu, experimentation and innovation is encouraged.

These three unifying factors – consciously shared deviancy, shared communication structures, and a tendency to syncretism – hang together and are portrayed by Campbell as a type of spontaneous self-organisation that naturally forms in response to the construction of deviance. Moreover, this sort of deviance is itself a by-product of centralised authority in the domain of knowledge (i.e., educational, professional, theological organisations). Thus, whenever a society produces authorised expert systems, something akin to the cultic milieu will always tend to establish itself in their shadow. This is a central prediction of the cultic milieu model.

Developing his model from the study of the 1960s counterculture, Campbell adds a fourth unifying factor – an “ideology of seekership” – which requires a more roundabout explanation. Due to a “historical accident”, the deviant cultic milieu in “the majority of western societies” has come to include a type of religious organisation conforming to what Ernst Troeltsch termed “mystical religion”: a religiosity focused “solely on the individual’s relationship with the divine”, emphasising “first-hand experience”, and tending, for that reason, to “neglect the historical, ecclesiastical and ritual concerns of religion”. In plainer terms, this means an emphasis on individual, subjective experience as the source of authenticity in religious matters, and a concomitant lack of stable, large-scale institutions that require submission to external authorities. It is important to notice that this trait is not a universal feature of the underground as Campbell conceives of it, but a *historically specific by-product* of the Western cultic milieu: Since direct individual access to the divine has been associated with heresy throughout most of Western church history, the cultic milieu of the West has come to be characterised by an ethos of individual seekership, and a quest for

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75 Ibid., 123.
76 Ibid., 120, 124-125.
personal experience marginalised within the church hierarchies. It follows from Campbell’s model that societies where this individualistic spirituality has not been rejected by establishment religion, its underground may also show a bigger appetite for authority and collectivism than has arguably been the case with the Western cultic milieu.\textsuperscript{77}

\textit{Internal Differentiation: Credibility Mobility and Deviance Maintenance}

The cultic milieu offers a general model for how rejected knowledge tends to be organised in society. Since it (1) incorporates many of the key elements of the sociology of the occult, and (2) has itself been fairly well-integrated into the study of esotericism since the 1990s,\textsuperscript{76} a good strategy for constructively reassessing and incorporating resources from the sociology of the occult is to do so through the lens of Campbell’s framework. In this spirit, I will now show how an aspect of Truzzi’s model, namely his notion of “credibility mobility” and “occult hierarchies”, can be adjusted and incorporated to give a better account of the \textit{internal differentiation} of the cultic milieu. Doing so also corrects one of the most glaring problems with Campbell’s model, namely its too confident emphasis on the milieu’s attitude of “mutual sympathy and support”. The milieu is not homogenous, but Campbell’s model alone does not provide the tools for understanding how internal divisions are produced.

Two crucial observations must be made: Claims of deviance are not only about defining the boundary between an establishment and an underground, and they are not only deployed from the top down. Since the occult/cultic milieu contains numerous actors that compete for various resources (e.g. cultural legitimacy, reputation, membership, financial resources), a significant amount of “boundary-work” takes place \textit{within} the milieu.\textsuperscript{79} A central part of how this is done is what we might call \textit{deviance}

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\textsuperscript{77} Since no attempts have so far been made to operationalise and test the cross-cultural and cross-historical ambitions of Campbell’s concept, much theoretical and empirical work remains to be done in this area. We can also note that Campbell may have stressed individualistic seekership stronger than the Western historical record warrants; see, for example, the importance of the cultic milieu for the spread of socialist ideas, eccentric communes, or for that matter fascist authoritarianism.

\textsuperscript{78} Most significantly in Hanegraaff, \textit{New Age Religion}, and Olav Hammer, \textit{Claiming Knowledge}. Fewer attempts have been made to theorise the links between esotericism and the cultic milieu. For two attempts, see Christopher Partridge, “Occulture Is Ordinary”, 113-133; Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal, “Close Companions? Esotericism and Conspiracy Theories”, in Asbjørn Dyrendal, David Robertson, and Egil Asprem (eds.), \textit{Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion} (Leiden and Boston: Brill, forthcoming).

\textsuperscript{79} On boundary-work, see Thomas Gieryn, “Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists”, \textit{American Sociological Review} 48
maintenance. Truzzi had one piece of this picture right when he observed that “occult hierarchies” tend to form as a result of the different legitimising strategies that spokespersons within the milieu take. The general rule, he suggested, is that when a current seeks to gain legitimacy in the broader culture, for example to compete on equal terms with mainstream medicine or become a legitimate scientific discipline, it “(1) tends to dissociate itself from other occultisms, and (2) develop non-occult terminology to minimize its occult appearance”.  

An excellent example of this process is parapsychology, which progressively distanced itself from spiritualism and earlier versions of psychical research as it managed to create a foothold within Establishment institutions. This social process creates a pecking order, in which groups that are closer to mainstream acceptance not only seek the affirmation of those that have more acceptance than themselves, but also derogatorily dismiss and distance themselves from groups that enjoy less acceptance (Fig. 1). For example, Truzzi observes that

hypnosis journals (now that hypnosis has established itself in psychology) avoid publication of articles relating hypnosis to extrasensory perception and leave such articles to the parapsychology journals. The latter seem to welcome such article [sic], thus relating their less legitimated anomalies (ESP variables) to newly accepted hypnosis. At the same time, the parapsychology journals apparently ignore publication of experiments by proponents of astrology, a form of ‘occultism’ less legitimized among scientists than their own. In turn, astrology journals seem to welcome reference to ESP findings but generally ignore less ‘established’ occultisms’ claims. This is by no means a stable arrangement, however, since some forms of occultism have come into and out of fashion and have evidenced a kind of credibility mobility.

As the final sentence makes clear, the point is not to find intrinsic differences between types of “occult belief”, but rather to focus on the sociological mechanisms by which differentiation and hierarchies emerge through the discursive practices of actors both within and outside of the occult milieu.

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80 Truzzi, “Definition and Dimensions”, 639.
82 Truzzi, “Definition and Dimensions”, 639-640; emphasis added.
Truzzi’s model is, however, too simple in that it considers credibility mobility as a one-directional process: mobility is moving “up” and “out”. Thinking in terms of the cultic milieu, we should however expect a pecking order that goes in the opposite direction to emerge as well. This is because deviancy is not always seen as a liability: To the contrary, deviance from the mainstream and conflict with external orthodoxies form a large part of the social identity of agents in the cultic milieu who adhere to a “common consciousness of deviant status”. When marginality is elected rather than imposed, deviance becomes an asset. This enables a social dynamic where the outward mobility, characterised by accommodation to establishments and a rejection of other “occultisms”, is counterweighted by an inward mobility, characterised by affirming deviant status and intensifying the oppositional rhetoric against establishment out-groups (Fig. 2). Due to this dynamic, a group in the cultic milieu that accommodates to the establishment or the mainstream (i.e. has success outside the milieu itself) will

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83 Campbell, “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu, and Secularization”, 134.
typically be portrayed as a corrupted sell-out by purist countercultural elites who continue to consolidate identity within the milieu.

Fig. 2: Deviance maintenance as a two-way process, vis-à-vis multiple authorised discourses.

4. Concluding Discussion: Towards a Social History of Rejected Knowledge
How might these points help refine the current notion of esotericism as rejected knowledge? In this final section I will start from the assumption that the historical processes described by Hanegraaff installed a peculiar logic to the development of esotericism, which, although it has precursors and analogues in earlier periods,\(^\text{84}\) is new with the modern period. The theoretical resources discussed above can help us understand its cultural and social logic in more detailed ways. They point the way to a social history of rejected knowledge, in which categories such as class, education, gender, and race, and processes such as specialisation and professionalisation become

\(^{84}\) I am thinking for example of the production of “heresy” in earlier periods, and especially the documentable effects that the index had on the activity of protestant printers during the reformation. “Forbidden” books became priced commodities, especially for protestant audiences who saw in them a source of rebellion. On this, see Leen Spruit, “Censorship and Canon: A Note on Some Medieval Works and Authors”, in How the West Was Won: On the Problems of Canon and Literary Imagination, with a Special Emphasis on the Middle Ages, Festschrift M. B(urcht) Pranger, eds. W. Otten, A. Vanderjagt, and H. de Vries (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 177.
crucial to the analysis.\textsuperscript{85} While much work remains to be done to craft such a perspective, I suggest that the proximity that the sociology of the occult has to recent developments in the historical study of esotericism makes this a good starting point for taking the first steps.

\textit{Underground/Establishment Dynamics Revisited}

We should begin by recognising that there is no \textit{a priori} reason why rejected knowledge should be embraced and shared socially by groups such as the nineteenth century occultists. In fact, probably the vast majority of rejected knowledge eventually ends up as \textit{forgotten} knowledge. A sociological answer to why it sometimes takes on new life can be found in the underground/establishment dynamic, which we have just discussed in the shape of Campbell’s cultic milieu model, and which can be seen simply as a by-product of knowledge specialisation. Here, however, it may be useful to attempt a general definition of what an “underground” is, in purely social terms. For these purposes, I will define the underground as \textit{a web of social transactions that take place outside the control of those institutions in a given society (its “establishment”) that have the power to impose negative sanctions (e.g. legal, economic, social).} This makes clear that the underground is analytically distinct from any of the contents that may circulate in it. Examples of underground networks include black markets, criminal networks, oppositional political groups (e.g. revolutionary groups, terrorist cells, outlawed political parties), subversive artistic milieus, deviant religious movements, or arenas for stigmatised leisure activities (e.g. “drugs”, prostitution, gambling), sexualities, literatures or other forms of outlawed expression. For a number of very different reasons, these networks prefer to conduct transactions outside the reach of a society’s authoritative institutions. Due to the shared desire to avoid such attention, social spaces tend to be created where different underground networks flow into one another.\textsuperscript{86} Deviance creates social affinities; the underground is simply a term for the social relations that result from such affinities.

What happened with esoteric rejected knowledge, then, was that it got picked up by pre-existing underground networks, was unavoidably blended with other elements

\textsuperscript{85} I am envisioning an approach along the lines suggested by Peter Burke. See, e.g., Peter Burke, \textit{A Social History of Knowledge: From Gutenberg to Diderot} (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000); Burke, \textit{A Social History of Knowledge II: From the Encyclopédie to Wikipedia} (Cambridge. Polity Press, 2012).

\textsuperscript{86} This, of course, is not so much a law as a tendency; to what degree different underground networks in a given society in fact interact with each other will always remain an open empirical question.
that circulated in those networks (recall Campbell’s point about pressures toward
syncretisation), and set to play a diverse number of functions relative to the strategic
goals of individuals in the networks. This story finds support in recent studies on the
historical origins of modern occultism in France. The “revival” of esoteric rejected
knowledge and its dissemination in the early nineteenth century took place above all in
radical socialist networks, with their associated journals and publication outlets. As
Julian Strube writes, a crucial figure such as Eliphas Lévi absorbed most of his
knowledge about magic and the occult from the utopian socialist press. Therefore,

[h]is reception of early-modern or medieval sources was remarkably superficial and
selective. For this reason, it can hardly be said that early-modern or medieval sources
formed the “frame of reference” for his magical theory. It was exactly the other way
around, if he showed any actual knowledge of such writings.

This is not just about revising our view of the exact lines of transmission. It also explains
where key characteristics of modern occultism came from: namely, from the radical
views on religion, science, and politics already circulating in utopian socialist networks.
This holds for the notion of the unification of science and religion, the call for spiritually
enlightened rule, and, not least, the ambiguous anticlericalism of much occult thought.
These pre-existing networks were absorbing deviant political ideas, fringe science, and
tenets deemed heretical by the church, and putting them in the service of their own ends
– which in this period were often political as much as spiritual. Once these syntheses had
been concocted and continued to spread to underground milieus in other countries
(shaped by different political and cultural realities), a number of occultist movements
emerged with separate and often competing emphases.

*The Question of Mobility: When Occultism Reaches the Seats of Power*

An obvious criticism against this underground-focused model must now be addressed.
Does it not overlook the fact that many of the people who got involved with occultism
throughout the nineteenth century were, in fact, “respectable” members of “high

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society”? Doesn’t it conflict with the near-establishment status that certain segments of occultism enjoyed at the century’s end? Spiritualist séances were brought to the courts of Europe and to the White House in Washington; leading scientists studied occult phenomena in search of hidden natural forces; and key theosophists and hermetic ritual magicians hailed from bourgeois and aristocratic backgrounds. In light of these facts, does the model not present a too simplistic, or even flatly false, picture of a field that is heterogeneous and complex, both in its substantial and its social dimensions? These are important criticisms, but they are anticipated by the sociology of the occult.

Two points must be raised. First of all, we must be careful not to confuse the underground/establishment distinction with distinctions of class. The establishment/underground distinction concerns the asymmetric power relations between various institutions and social activities in a given society, assuming nothing about the socioeconomic status of the individuals that take part in them. As we have seen, the sociology of the occult treated the class aspect of the occult revival as an empirical question, and found that it was largely a middle class phenomenon. The point here is that aristocrats, politicians, bureaucrats, police officers, medical doctors, university professors or any other individual who occupies a day-time position within establishment institutions may very well participate in underground networks – whether for trading in un-taxed or forbidden goods and services on the black market, blowing off steam at illegal nightclubs, or seeking out the services of culturally deviant spiritual or medical providers. In this sense, the establishment is interpenetrated by the underground.

Secondly, we must distinguish the establishment from the mainstream. Ideas or practices that are officially dismissed by establishments and pushed underground may still remain vastly popular and even demographically dominant. In fact, any adequate theory of mainstreaming must acknowledge the unique appeal provided by an aura of deviance, e.g. as a form of conspicuous consumption signalling “coolness” and subcultural capital. In this sense, then, underground status does not necessitate elitism – although the mainstreaming of an underground product will typically spark attempts at amplifying deviance among subcultural elites.

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The notion of deviance maintenance is useful here, and the history of parapsychology may again serve as an example. The respectability of early psychical research was ensured by the considerable class privileges wielded by the founders and members of the Society for Psychical Research. Later, its professionalisation into parapsychology was effected by individuals who already possessed legitimate PhD degrees and university positions.90 This is a straight-forward case of Truzzian credibility mobility, which is made possible because privileged establishment agents take an interest in deviant knowledge. While the status created this way eventually crumbled, the process has had lasting effects on the mainstream adoption of parapsychological beliefs: they now occupy the “sweet spot” of being associated both with arguments from authority through high-class figures who at some point have spoken favourably of them, and with the “coolness” that stems from emphasising opposition with “dogmatic, materialist” science.91 This type of deviance maintenance is central to what we might call “the Galileo gambit”: the now common phenomenon of claiming that one’s own beliefs must be true because they are rejected by the establishment, an argument usually made through an implicit or explicit comparison with “noble heretics” like Galileo.

These concepts help us account for the concrete ways in which “occult” contents can become part of the mainstream and even shape establishment discourses. Credibility mobility describes how this can happen when a society is in a “steady state”, resulting simply from the competition for social and cultural capital.92 It is, however, worth recalling that several of the theorists who comment on the underground’s potential for shaping societal norms point to historical periods characterised by the decline of institutionalised meaning systems as the context in which this potential is typically actualised. The interpenetration of the establishment by the underground makes sense of this point. It highlights that such an exertion does not have to be seen as “revolutionary” – the underground overthrowing established institutions, as Webb portrayed it in his Occult Establishment – but rather “reformatory”: alternative ideas, values, and practices, whether political, religious, economic, or otherwise, are already available to people in places of power due to a social proximity with the underground networks in which they circulate. Finally, this discussion shows that we do not need

90 On this, see especially Asprem, “A Nice Arrangement of Heterodoxies”.
92 See also, Asprem, “Dis/Unity of Knowledge”, 554-556.
Tiryakian’s theory of “esoteric culture’s” societal function as a whole: given that a sufficient variation of cultural forms is preserved by the underground/establishment dynamic, it suffices to look at the motivations of individuals who compete for social and cultural resources.

*Networks of Transmission in Historical Perspective: A Prospective Research Program*

I will end by pointing to a central aspect of social theories of the occult/cultic milieu that not only deserves more attention, but offers something concrete for historians: its communication structures. If the underground/establishment divide is a permanent feature of big, specialised societies, and if the particular dynamics of the underground that are related to cultic innovation depend on the specific ways in which information is shared, then we should expect that changes in media infrastructures – that is, changes in *mediatisation* – are a crucial variable when *historicising* the cultic milieu.93 This seems a particularly apt way for historians to use sociological insights to sharpen their research questions regarding the adoption and spread of rejected knowledge. Media technologies matter to this picture, because we should expect major shifts in both the extent and the social organisation of underground networks depending on their ability to replicate, share, and compare information across geographical space and social demographics. Thus, we could derive a set of hypotheses about diachronic changes, particularly of sudden historical ruptures, by relating them to new forms of mediatisation borne by innovations in information technologies. For the sake of illustration, consider the following (incomplete) list of five major transitions:

- **The invention of writing and literacy** (Antiquity). Literacy made it possible to stabilise doctrinal systems and transfer knowledge across distances and generations, but it also provided the first possibility of recording, copying, and sharing knowledge *outside* of institutional control.94 For example, the Greek magical papyri give insight into a proto-cultic milieu evidencing a high degree of

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syncrétisation and individual experimentation with religious frameworks and ritual repertoires.

- **The emergence of the printing press** (1400s). While a number of technological changes took place after the invention of writing (e.g., development of alphabets, materials and mediums such as parchment, papyrus, paper, the codex), the invention of the printing press introduced a truly revolutionary change in the dissemination of knowledge. As is well known, this technology did not only allow for the printing of establishment texts, but in fact fuelled dissenting and oppositional movements, most notably during the European reformation. The appearance of durable printed books and pamphlets also occasioned the establishment of the *Index librorum prohibitorum* by the Vatican, which was itself first printed in 1559. Interestingly, the index soon became a list of particularly attractive books that shaped underground reading habits, especially among protestants.\(^{95}\)

- **The industrialisation of printing and universalisation of education** (1800s). Industrialisation provided cheap and mass-produced paper and printing technology, which made possible the emergence of journals, newspapers, and cheap books catering to broad audiences. Together with the explosive growth in literacy rates in the industrialising nations, this laid the foundation for yet another great shift in the dissemination of underground knowledge. Subversive groups could put out their own papers and journals (like the French socialists who produced Éliphas Lévi), eventually giving rise to entire “counter-public spheres” and alternative “periodical communities”,\(^{96}\) of which the late-century occultist press was an intrinsic part.\(^{97}\)

- **Photocopying** (1950s). The emergence of photocopying technology (“xeroxing”) made it possible to “hack” existing publications and create cheap, DYI publications and “fanzines”. This technology led to a whole new genre with its own social networks – the “zine scene” – often connected with oppositional and even actively suppressed politics and heterodox spirituality. Christian Greer and

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95 See Spruit, “Censorship and Canon”, 177.
Colin Duggan have argued that the zine scene, embraced by anarchists and punks, also gave rise to the postmodern esoteric current of “chaos magick”, both in the practice of copying, cutting, and modifying existing information, and in creating new, self-consciously underground and deliberately oppositional channels of communication.98

- *The internet and the world wide web* (1990s). The broad-scale emergence of the internet and the world wide web in the 1990s has, once again, revolutionised the ways people create and share information in such a fundamental and rapidly shifting way that we are still wrestling with its ramifications. In the early days, the internet *embodied* the underground – many of its pioneers were associated with preexisting countercultures, while the web itself existed outside the reach of policing institutions. As this has started to change over the past decade, most underground transactions have moved to the dark web, from the distribution of illegal substances and other black-market service industries to the communication networks of subversive groups. For the cultic milieu, internet-based technologies such as chat protocols, email lists, websites, forums, blogs, and social media apps have expanded the scope of transnational contact, massively increased the speed of transmission across the network, and provided better access to esoteric literature.

Whether we are considering magical networks in antiquity, radical protestants of the early modern period, occultists of the late nineteenth century, 1980s punk esoterrorists, or virtual witches of the 2010s, the questions that a sociologically informed historian should ask include the following: How do individuals encounter, interact with, and spread knowledge with others? Where is the desired knowledge located, what are the technological means by which it is disseminated, who *owns* those technological means, and who has access to them? What is the content of the knowledge that is spread? Are there any negative sanctions in place for these types of knowledge, if they were to be detected? If yes, what are they, who enforces them, and why? If no, is the knowledge still considered “deviant” in some way, and if so, by whom? Do those who seek out the

knowledge view it as deviant, and is that a good or a bad thing? How is knowledge legitimised and authorised within the network? What functions does the knowledge have for those who seek and develop it?

These questions are, in fact, updated versions of Truzzi’s five “dimensions of the occult”. When we disentangle the questions from the term “occult” and formulate them generically as having to do with networks of communication, the relationships between individuals and institutions, the discursive aspects of labelling, and dynamics related to the search for, and maintenance of, social identity, they can be very useful for historians of esotericism. Indeed, if historians were to answer these questions for each of the five historical case studies mentioned above (from late antique magicians to virtual witches), filling them in with great detail about the individuals involved, their idiosyncratic goals and passions, their circles of friends and acquaintances, and show how texts and practices of various kinds emerge, spread, and mutate, we would not only have a much more detailed and complex picture of how “esoteric” rejected knowledge is constructed but also be in a better position to answer why it continues to spread and grow with such vitality.

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