

Occultism in International Studies: A Research Agenda

Wednesday 5 June 2024 10:45 (1h 30m)

International Relations (IR) as a field has for a long time been preoccupied with understanding the possibilities and pitfalls of modernity. Here, it has been approached in terms of the knowledge system that modernity both naturalised and denaturalised, the subjectivities it simultaneously created and silenced, and the politics it made both possible and impossible (Blaney and Tickner 2017, Paolini 1999, Ruggie 1993, Shilliam 2013, Walker 1993). However, despite its preoccupation with modernity's contradictions, the role that the occult has played in constructing and reproducing these knowledge systems, subjectivities and politics has been largely left unquestioned. This Roundtable aims to open up space for an interrogation of the occult in IR, ultimately interrogating what the occult is a critique of both historically and in the present.

Occultism, meaning 'hidden' in Latin, is associated with ideas of the supernatural and magical beliefs and practices. Further, it is often thought of as the antithesis of rational modernity, associated with either pre-modern superstitious beliefs or tied to racialised and orientalist ideas of Eastern mysticism. However, ideas of the occult have been central to Western modernity since the onset of the Scientific Revolution, where it constituted the dialectics through which notions of science and knowledge were erected (Hanegraaff 1998). It further rose to political prominence in the late 19th century through its association with radical political agendas like socialism, feminism, and anti-colonial agitation (Owen 2004, Gandhi 2006). In a contemporary age of Instagram witches, the uptake of occultism in far-right political ideologies, and spiritual healing as an integral part of the global wellness industry, it is clear that occultism warrants our attention as IR scholars.

This Roundtable aims to explore the politics of the occult and what it is a critique of in terms of knowledge systems, subjectivities, and the politics of modernity. It starts from the premise that the occult is constructed as the 'other' of modernity as either belonging to a 'past' (within the space of Europe) or belonging to spaces outside of 'Europe' that have not yet 'caught up' with modernity. As such, in general, the occult is seen as 'before' and something that disappears as modernity is established. Yet, we argue that there is a dialectic relationship between the occult and scientific modernity that reproduces them both rather than a linear relationship when one follows the other. The aim of the Roundtable then is to investigate what possibilities and limitations this dialectic relationship creates and interrogate what it means for the knowledge systems, subjectivities, and politics under scrutiny in understanding the international.

Track Classification: Post-Structural Politics Working Group