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# Situated Knowledges and Diffractive Definitions of Esotericism

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Steven Engler and Mark Q. Gardiner provide a sophisticated discussion of the nature of academic definitions. By applying these general considerations to the question of “esotericism”, they review existing definitions in the field of esotericism studies and put together their own list of characteristics, which they call ‘A homeostatic property cluster definition of *esotericism*’.<sup>1</sup> The authors develop an illuminating comment on existing definitions, which opens up new perspectives on the field of esotericism studies in general. Reading through the article, I find myself in agreement with many points the authors make. At the same time, their arguments trigger a number of general questions about definitions and the organization of academic and societal knowledge, of which the field of esotericism studies is an excellent example.

In a most general sense, definitions are tools. While there may be examples of academic definitions that make normative claims about how the world “really” is—these would certainly fall into the category of what Engler and Gardiner call ‘rigid definitions’—most scholars today agree that definitions mainly serve as instruments for the academic task of analyzing complex phenomena. Definitions, then, can be seen as part of a toolbox that academics and other societal actors use to generate knowledge. Such a “pragmatic” understanding of the function of definitions, however, should not lead us to the conclusion that defining phenomena would be a neutral or “innocent” procedure. Every definition is an act of taxonomy that ultimately determines the limits of what can be known about a concrete phenomenon. Definitions not only help humans *gain* knowledge; they also *find* or *construct* knowledge; they legitimize, delegitimize, and establish orders of knowledge in communicational settings.

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1 Engler and Gardiner, ‘(Re)defining *Esotericism*’, 182–183.

Given this link between power and knowledge, it is not surprising that many critical theory scholars turn the definitions themselves into objects of study. They agree with Bruno Latour that '[t]he task of defining and ordering the social should be left to the actors themselves, not taken up by the analyst'.<sup>2</sup> What is more, if scholars engage in taxonomic work, their concrete situational contexts need to be part of the analysis. For the study of religion, Laurie Patton therefore claims that no theory of religion in the twenty-first century should exist without an accompanying theory of the university that produces such theories.<sup>3</sup>

What this boils down to is the insight that definitions aren't independent tools for studying a phenomenon; rather, they are part of the phenomenon itself. They *reflect* the 'situated knowledges'<sup>4</sup> of the participants who try to make sense of a situation. Or, formulated in the terms of Karen Barad's theory of agential realism: Definitions, as dynamic parts of the 'apparatus', contribute to the intra-active production of knowledge. If we change the setup of the apparatus, the process of diffraction will lead to different interference patterns of knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

The field of esotericism studies offers ample opportunity to analyze these mechanisms. Engler and Gardiner implicitly illustrate this when they point out that '[c]hoosing Umbanda as a prototype of the category *religion* would also problematize the boundary between *religion* and *esotericism*'.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, we can say that if we change the apparatus in which we engage discourses on esotericism, occultism, mysticism, spirituality, secrecy, metaphysics, New Age, etc., our intra-active production of knowledge will reveal different interference patterns. These interference patterns will then feed back into the apparatus itself, including the definitions based on the phenomenon's intra-active understanding.

Laurie Patton's remarks about the institutional "backup" of theories and definitions can also easily be applied to esotericism studies. It is by no means accidental that the growing demand of definitions of "(Western) esotericism" has coincided with the institutional establishment of esotericism studies at European and North American universities. Most of these research and study programs were only possible in the form of endowed chairs, with resources from

2 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 23.

3 See Patton, *Who Owns Religion?*, 16.

4 Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges'.

5 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. For a discussion of Barad's theory for the study of religion, see von Stuckrad, 'Undisciplining'.

6 Engler and Gardiner, '(Re)defining *Esotericism*', 174 note 66 (*italics original*).

private sponsors or stakeholder associations. In such a setting, theories and definitions of esotericism legitimize these programs' claims of relevance, and they reify alternative interpretations of Euro-American history. The institutionalization of esotericism studies, and the formation of international societies for the study of esotericism, resulted in a development similar to that described by Kurt Danziger for psychology:

There is an intimate relationship between the general forms of presuppositions, knowledge goals, and investigative practices and their specific embodiment. As the community of knowledge producers grows it develops internal norms and values that reflect its external alliances. Its professional project is directed at carving out and filling a particular set of niches in the professional ecosystem of its society, and its internal norms reflect the conditions for the success of this project. These norms tend to govern both the production of knowledge and the production of the producers of knowledge through appropriate training programs.<sup>7</sup>

As someone who has been part of the esotericism studies phenomenon at least since 2003, when I took up my first permanent position at the University of Amsterdam, I can attest to these mechanisms from my own experience. My knowledge as a white, male, European, tenured scholar was situated in a privileged environment that took the knowledge goals and definitional needs of esotericism studies for granted. Definitional work mainly serves the needs of the niche's self-affirmation and legitimization, and it is routinely ignored by societal stakeholders outside of academia.<sup>8</sup>

It would be an illuminating task to write the institutional history of esotericism studies. Such an endeavor would not be an attempt to improve definitions of esotericism. Rather, it would explore an intellectual movement that has troubled hegemonic narratives about European identity. The interference patterns of such an exercise may not even include the term 'esotericism' anymore.

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<sup>7</sup> Danziger, *Constructing the Subject*, 182.

<sup>8</sup> As a report from the "field", see von Stuckrad, 'Discussing Esotericism'.

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