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Julian Strube, *Sozialismus, Katholizismus und Okkultismus im Frankreich des 19. Jahrhunderts: Die Genealogie der Schriften von Eliphas Lévi*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2016. xviii + 700 pp. Bibliography and notes. \$140.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-3-11-047654-5.

Review by David Allen Harvey, New College of Florida.

Julian Strube has produced a massive, erudite, and extensively researched study of the life and work of Alphonse-Louis Constant, also known as Eliphas Lévi (a pseudonym derived from a Hebraization of his given names). Constant/Lévi is certainly one of the stranger and more interesting figures in the intellectual history of nineteenth-century France. Born into a working-class family in 1810, his mother directed him toward the priesthood from a young age, and he was educated for that purpose in the seminaries of Saint-Nicolas and Saint-Sulpice. Though he completed his studies and served as a deacon and a teacher in several Catholic schools, the young Constant did not take religious orders and later broke with the Church. Constant's unsuitability for a life of celibacy and chastity was demonstrated by a series of scandalous love affairs, including several with young women under his spiritual direction, but a greater factor in his departure, it would appear, was his rejection of the political conservatism and doctrinal intolerance of the early nineteenth-century Church. In the 1840s, the young Constant drifted toward radical socialism, arguing in such works as *La Bible de la liberté* (1841) and *La dernière incarnation* (1846) that these doctrines better expressed Christ's message of brotherly love, rejection of material wealth, and ministry to the poor than did the official dogmas of the Vatican. When the Revolution of 1848 broke out, Constant threw himself into the whirlwind of revolutionary political clubs and journals in order to advance his message of Christian socialism. In the years following the Revolution's defeat, Constant adopted the pen name Eliphas Lévi and devoted himself to the study and dissemination of esoteric or occult philosophy, eventually producing three massive treatises: *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie* (1856), *Histoire de la magie* (1860), and *La clef des grands mystères* (1861). While these works were more commercially successful in his own time than were his earlier revolutionary tracts and attracted him a small number of disciples, Constant was largely forgotten by the time of his death in 1875, and when the French occult revival of the 1880s and 1890s claimed him as a predecessor and influence, its leading exponents, Stanislas de Guaita and Gérard Encausse (Papus) had to rescue him from oblivion and reconstruct his life and teachings second-hand.

Long ignored by historians, Constant/Lévi's first biographies were written by authors within the esoteric tradition, notably Paul Chacornac,^[1] and understandably focused on his writings on ritual magic and esoteric philosophy to the exclusion of his earlier Christian socialist works. The image of Eliphas Lévi constructed by the *fin-de-siècle* occultists and their later imitators presented him as the almost single-handed renovator of an ancient tradition of secret wisdom, stretching back through Renaissance Hermeticism, medieval alchemy, and late antique Neoplatonism to ancient sages such as Hermes Trismegistus, Pythagoras, and Zoroaster. According to this representation, the paradoxical disconnect between the young Christian socialist Constant and the mature magician Lévi was easily explained: at some point after 1848, he had been initiated into the ancient mysteries, probably by the Polish exile and mystic Hoenë Wronski, with whom he was briefly in close contact in 1853-1854. This interpretation

allowed occultist commentators on Lévi to ignore or downplay his early socialist writings and political activity and to recast him as a vital link in an unbroken chain of transmission of ancient mysteries to the modern world. When intellectual historians, beginning with James Webb and Christopher McIntosh in the 1970s, began to look seriously at nineteenth-century occultism and Lévi's contributions to it, they similarly focused on their subject's mature magical works, largely overlooking his earlier radical writings as unrelated to their topic [2]. Most of the subsequent secondary literature, though increasingly skeptical of claims of secret initiation and attuned to the broader political and cultural context of fin-de-siècle occultism, has also reflected the assumption of a caesura between the two phases of Constant/Lévi's intellectual career.

Strube's study of Constant/Lévi is self-consciously revisionist, rejecting what he calls an "artificial division" between the Christian socialist and occultist stages of his subject's work. Instead, Strube argues that Constant developed a reasonably coherent, if remarkably eclectic, philosophy and worldview in the 1840s and remained true to them throughout the remainder of his life. The early chapters of the book offer a fascinating overview of the various strands of romantic socialism and popular Christianity of early nineteenth-century France, with particular focus on the leading figures who influenced the young Constant, such as Félicité de Lammenais, Henri de Saint-Simon, and Charles Fourier. Rejecting both the post-Revolutionary polarization of French society and the rise of social inequality and rampant individualism of early industrial society, they sought to restore harmony through a new spirit of "universal association," grounded in Christian principles of charity and mutual aid, the replacement of private ownership of property with various forms of collectivism and communalism, and the replacement of the chaos of the market with rational economic planning. An avid and eclectic reader who quickly became disillusioned by the conservatism and conformity of his clerical education, the young Constant devoured romantic, socialist, and reform Catholic texts, became convinced that these best expressed the altruistic and egalitarian spirit of the true teachings of Christ, and sought, under the late July Monarchy and the Second Republic, to bring about the kingdom of Heaven upon earth through revolutionary political activity.

Strube's greatest contribution, I believe, is to recover and analyze the intellectual and cultural worlds in which the young Constant operated. He demonstrates the variety of influences on his subject's work, moving beyond works that are, if not well-known, at least reasonably familiar to scholars of the period to track down even the most obscure and ephemeral of Constant's writings. This exhaustive study of Constant's oeuvres allows him to support his arguments regarding the essential continuity underlying Constant's philosophy. Becoming convinced at an early age that the dogmas of official Catholicism betrayed the true spirit of Christ's teachings, he sought throughout his life to recover a "true" religion that would restore harmony and equity to society, a quest that would lead him to the early modern belief in a *prisca theologia*, a secret and ancient natural religion that lay beneath the external forms of all the world's religions, to the study of Neoplatonist and Hermetic philosophy, to the reexamination of doctrines deemed heretical by the medieval Church, and to the practice of ritual magic. Despite the quite obvious differences in subject matter, tone, and authorial voice between Constant's socialist writings of the 1840s and Lévi's esoteric treatises of the 1850s and 1860s, Strube argues that they were animated by a consistent vision of romantic Christian socialism and a common quest to restore harmony to a deeply divided society. Similarly, Strube's detailed and well researched account of Constant's life, friendships, and influences allows him to reject the claim of Lévi's occultist biographers that the former priest underwent a formal initiation into secret ancient mysteries at some point in the period 1848-1854.

Despite the quality and extent of his research, Strube's claim for the essential continuity of Constant's intellectual trajectory remains unconvincing, and is not infrequently belied by his own evidence. It should in no way be surprising that a man who lived through sixty-five highly eventful years, experiencing both personal hardships and social-political upheavals, and actively seeking new sources of wisdom and illumination throughout his life, would see his views evolve over time. The young Constant's worldview was structured around a re-interpretation of Christianity through the prism of revolutionary socialism,

while concepts and elements that would be central to Lévi's later work, such as the Kabbalah and its supposed connection to the Tarot, the universal influence of the "astral light" (which Strube correctly links to Mesmer's "magnetic fluid"), belief in the ancient secret wisdom or *prisca theologia* underlying all religions, and the Hermetic dogma of correspondence between the Macrocosm (the universe) and the Microcosm (of man), are largely absent from his early writings. Some of Strube's pertinent observations (that Lévi's understanding of the Kabbalah was superficial and largely erroneous, that his encounter with many ancient and medieval esoteric texts was mediated through later French commentators, and that his interest in such esoteric subjects as Mesmerism and Spiritism was shared by many other romantic socialists) qualify and problematize, but do not disprove, the widely held notion of a break, or at least a significant shift, between the socialist and occultist phases of Constant/Lévi's career.

With regard to matters political, I would cite two significant differences between the young Constant and the older Lévi: their views on revolutionary violence and on the ability of the people to govern itself. Constant's early works, particularly *La Bible de la liberté*, were explicitly political and revolutionary, thundering with Biblical wrath against oppression and injustice and announcing the dawn of a new age of justice and equality with almost bloodthirsty glee. Not surprisingly, these radical texts shocked many of his contemporaries, not to mention his erstwhile ecclesiastical superiors, and led to several brief prison terms over the 1840s. Nevertheless, Constant's rhetorical enthusiasm for revolution cooled considerably when he was confronted by the real thing in 1848 and beyond. His later works on esoteric philosophy largely abandoned the field of collective political action in favor of a personal quest for enlightenment and for the recovery of ancient wisdom. When, late in life, he returned to an explicit discussion of a new social and political order against the backdrop of the Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Commune in one of his final works, *Les portes de l'avenir* (1871), he despaired of the ability of the masses to govern themselves, and instead looked for a small community of adepts to govern wisely on behalf of the people, under the slogan, "Everything for the people by the elite of the people, this is the truth" (p. 577). Strube explicitly faults my contention that this text advocated governance by "an elite brotherhood of sages" [3] and insists that even at this late date, Lévi's social vision remained essentially socialist. While some of the passages of *Les portes d'avenir* outline a meticulously organized and invasive approach to social organization in some ways reminiscent of Saint-Simon or Fourier, "socialism," by 1871, meant something specific and rather different from Lévi's imagined "reign of wisdom," in which voting rights would be restricted to those few who could pass a competitive examination. While Constant/Lévi never abandoned his youthful hopes for a harmonious and happy society grounded on "universal association" and timeless spiritual principles, the heady idealism of his youth had thus given way to a world-weary skepticism.

Published by De Gruyter in Berlin, this is the sort of book--massive, erudite, bristling with scholarly apparatus, and written for a very small, learned audience--that, for better or worse, is no longer published by American academic presses. Like most books over 600 pages in length, it would have benefited from some careful pruning, as it is occasionally repetitive and frequently digresses, although the digressions are generally interesting ones. The author has clearly devoted a great deal of time and effort to his subject, and while some of his conclusions are not beyond question, the quality and quantity of research that went into this book make it a valuable reference work for scholars of romantic socialism, esoteric philosophy, and the history of religions.

NOTES

[1] Paul Chacornac, *Eliphas Lévi, renovateur de l'occultisme en France* (Paris: Chacornac, 1926).

[2] James Webb, *The Occult Underground* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court Press, 1974); Christopher McIntosh, *Eliphas Lévi and the French Occult Revival* (London: Rider, 1972).

[3] David Allen Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment: Occultism and Politics in Modern France* (De Kalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005), 204.

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