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# The Esoteric Wokeness of 'Ancient Aliens'

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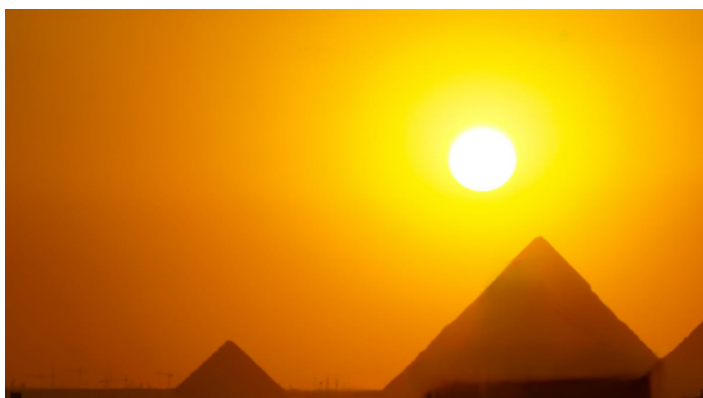


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The History Channel series *Ancient Aliens*, which will soon conclude its 20th season, pioneered an increasingly influential brand of pseudo-history, also on display in the recent Netflix production *Ancient Apocalypse*. Both shows gain their appeal simultaneously from the allure of hidden knowledge and the wish to escape from discomfiting truths. The core narrative they purvey, in the words of *Ancient Apocalypse* host Graham Hancock, is that before the emergence of human civilization as we know it, there reigned an “advanced culture with an industrial power greater than our own,” a “precursor race” that presumably arrived from another planet. This supercivilization perished in an unknown catastrophe, but not before passing on some of its knowledge to benighted early humans, who have been playing catch-up with these forgotten progenitors of civilization ever since.

This story is a Freudian family romance on a galactic scale,

expressing the universal wish to have different, more impressive forebears —to be descended from royalty. At the same time, it reflects the discredit into which sanctioned expertise has fallen, enjoining us to forget everything we thought we knew and accept the tutelage of outsider gurus like Hancock. Like many of today's "red pills," this is a metastasization of the Enlightenment dictum to think for oneself, but the resulting worldview is both anti-Darwinian and post-secular. It is also a sort of esoteric wokeness: a pessimistic politics of the oppressed according to which elites have deprived humanity of the grandeur of a spiritual backstory.

The pseudo-archaeology informing the *Ancient Aliens* extended universe is driven by a systematic disregard for intellectual antecedents. Contrary to the consensus that civilization emerged across the globe at varying locales and occasions—supporting the idea that all humans everywhere share the same creative capacity for innovation—it posits an unnamed ancient civilization that created thousands of pyramids (some under the oceans and on Antarctica) between 10,000 and 30,000 years ago. The pyramids, real or imagined,

are transformed in this account into a network of intergalactic waystations. The literal scheme of global pyramids has also fostered a figurative pyramid scheme for the mind: From Bali to Sedona, there is now an ancient-alien pilgrimage trail, devoted to rituals of “akashic heart readings” and “regression and reincarnation therapy.”

The Atlantis Metaphysical Center in Sedona, Ariz., was a casualty of the pandemic and is now online-only, but it still offers “sacred temple work,” astrocartography, and galactic star codes. This latter offering ostensibly reveals paths to Atlantis, the master concept that holds *Ancient Aliens* and *Ancient Apocalypse* together. At the heart of the Atlantis fetish is a projection of indigeneity suffused with technical ingenuity that surpasses our own, an idyll in which the superpowers afforded by advanced technoscience may be enjoyed without the grime of industry.

Like much in today’s culture, this worldview is a postmodern repurposing of a 19th-century grand narrative: Theosophy, which postulated a spiritual foundation for humanity grounded in an

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intertextual reading of the corpus of ancient wisdom literatures.

Theosophy has its roots in the profound reaction to secularism and Darwinism initiated by the movement's founder, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. This Russian maverick intellectual discarded Darwin but also all manner of Victorian norms and assumptions; her rejection of Eurocentrism later led Gandhi to praise her for having “disabused me of the notion fostered by the missionaries that Hinduism was rife with superstition.”

In her 1877 book, *Isis Unveiled*, Blavatsky found in the global corpus of ancient wisdom literature, from Pythagoras to the Bhagavad Gita, a fount of insight and spirituality surpassing those of modern civilization. She thus rejected the notion that the highest reaches of human faculties could be arrived at via any system of evolution. Claiming that Darwin's hypothesis had been well known and rejected in the ancient world (by both Aristotle and the Babylonians), her thought was an ambitious effort to find an alternative.

Blavatsky's 1888 magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine*, elaborates this grand

narrative. In a manner parallel to Marx's pivot between the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts to Capital*, she pivoted from philosophical criticism to a broad-based structural and dynamic theory of history. She couldn't escape the omnipresent language of race ubiquitous in her day, but sought to edit that reference point with Buddhist texts that speak of various successive "earths," referring to humanity as a single collective that has been manifested in seven "race-earths" preceded by the astral body or human in spirit form. She shifted her response to Darwin into an alternative chain of evolution based on the strength of spiritual consciousness, and not mere physical survival, one which begins on the highest of planes and gradually descends. Yet steeped as she was in the romantic optimism of the 19th century, Blavatsky also proclaimed that a new humanity was being born. Her feminism and anti-colonial humanitarian universalism reflected her conviction that humanity may begin again and have another chance.

Given the pessimism, if not outright nihilism, that prevails in the early 21st century, it is hardly surprising that Blavatsky's contemporary popularizers brood instead on a

tragic sense of loss, convinced of recurrent, impending doom. Rather than the hope for a new beginning, we are left with an aesthetic wallowing in living past the point of no return, confronted by inevitable disaster, whether inflicted by climate, politics, or social breakdown. Theosophy's universal fraternity is replaced with a sensational and hyperbolic vision of human helplessness, an omni-pessimism that sees decline as the inescapable horizon.

The post-truth of *Ancient Aliens* and *Ancient Apocalypse* further undermines the egalitarian and rationally constructed narrative that civilization represents a shared patrimony, one that emerged multiply as a variegated expression of human ingenuity. While appealing to the hunger for grand narratives that make sense of a chaotic, fragmented world, the shows invite viewers into a position of deep despondency about human possibilities, crediting civilization's lasting achievements to a long-lost master race that, despite its ostensible superiority, couldn't save itself from destruction. What hope is there for us lesser beings?

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