

MA Cultural Astronomy and Astrology
Astrology, History, Spirit and Soul
Week 10: Astrology in the Contemporary World
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Purpose of the Week

To gain a critical understanding of western astrology in the 20th century, including its claims and cultural position.

Tasks This Week

Having kept notes through the last nine weeks, make your final choice of essay topics, if you have not done so already.

Make sure that you can complete your second essay by the deadline, and that you have planned your time.

Weekly Description

This week's class deals with western astrology in the 20th and 21st centuries. I hesitate to write 'modern' astrology, because this would presume that 20th century astrology was different to that in previous centuries. Because of the apparent decline of 'high' and 'middling' astrology in the 17th century, it is common to talk of the 'revival' of astrology in the 19th- 20th centuries. This 'revival' is a phenomenon remarked upon by many cultural commentators but, is little understood. In terms of potentially significant developments in the twentieth century, there are three principal strands to consider:

1. The development of a psychological astrology, building on theosophical origins and adapting (primarily Jungian) psychology
2. The spread of mass astrology through sun-sign columns and books
3. The programme of scientific research into astrology by sympathizers, chiefly Michel Gauquelin (as opposed to hostile scientific inquiry based on the assumption that astrology's claims are false)

Each of these developments may be seen as an attempt to reform an astrology which was otherwise seen as technically or interpretatively deficient. The spread of mass astrology might be seen as also an attempt to popularise it. Both that and the development of psychological astrology can be viewed as attempts to create a modern language for astrology.

Other issues which may be pertinent such as attitudes to professionalisation amongst astrologers, religious and ideological affiliations, the search for technical perfection (e.g. interest in classical and medieval astrology (for some, a response to the perceived deficiencies of modern psychological astrology); the belief that some astrological techniques can be proved to work, others disproved) or ideological purity (e.g. exclusive definitions of astrology as 'science', 'divination' or 'psychology', which preclude other

possibilities). The period for the early 1980s onwards saw a disillusion amongst some astrologers with the modernising tendencies of the psychologisers and the scientisers (my words), and in the so-called 'traditional revival', a restoration first of medieval astrology (in the 1980s) and then Greek astrology (in the 1990s). An increased interest in Indian astrology in the 1990s paralleled these developments.

This class will consider these phenomena, asking whether astrology can be considered as an anachronistic survival in the modern world or as an integral component of modernism. As such it draws on the discussion of modernism and post-modernism in the Introduction module.

Additional strands of astrology which are less well-documented and hardly noticed by academics include those of magical and pagan groups.

Psychological Astrology

One of the most significant features of 20th century astrology was the development of forms of astrology which prioritized character description, self-understanding, and psychological development. Such astrology owes an immense debt to the work of C.G. Jung, the founder of analytical psychology, and Dane Rudhyar, the American astrologer and, since the 1970s, Liz Greene. We deal with these developments in the Sky and Psyche module but you are welcome to explore this material in your essays.

Science and Skepticism

One feature of 20th century astrology which is still awaiting scholarly treatment is the rise of positivist views of astrology, in particular the results obtained by Michel Gauquelin (1928-1991) who, together with François Gauquelin (1929-2006?), found statistically significant correlations between the diurnal positions of five planets [including the Moon] at birth and professional eminence, largely in accord with traditional astrological symbolism (e.g. Mars and athletes, Jupiter and politicians, Saturn and scientists, etc.). The most famous of these has become known as the "Mars effect". The Gauquelins then related these findings to personality by extracting character traits from biographies of eminent individuals. Other results pointed to a tendency to inherit similar planetary placements (when significant) from one's parents. Subsequent attempts to replicate these results have thrown some doubt on the character-trait work and planetary heredity, but the eminent results have survived several replications, including both the notorious attempt by the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal in the 1970s to prove otherwise and more thorough and capable tests by Suitbert Ertel. Recently Geoff Dean has attempted to explain the effect as resulting from parents recording auspicious birth-times for their children. So Gauquelin's basic results continue to be a problem for both scientists and, given their uselessness in actual practice, astrologers. More broadly, there are issues here of the way rhetorical context (cultural, social and political) influences and perhaps even constitutes 'scientific truth'.

Although the academic reading this week is light (due to the sparse nature of contemporary scholarship in astrology), the potential amount of source material is huge. You therefore need to exercise your discretion in deciding which areas to pursue.

Thought for the Week: Is modern astrology modern?