

Discovering a Genius: Rudolf Steiner at 150

Frederick Amrine



2011

Willi Brandt (who won the Nobel Peace Prize, and knew whereof he spoke) credits Rudolf Steiner with having made the greatest contribution to world peace of the twentieth century. The long-time editor of *The Nation*, Victor Navasky, described him in his memoir of 2005 as “light-years ahead of the curve,” and others such as Joseph Beuys have found in Steiner’s deep insights into human nature the possibility of a thoroughgoing renewal of culture. Owen Barfield argued that Steiner is perhaps the key thinker of modern times, and abandons his usual British reserve to assert: “By comparison, not only with his contemporaries but with the general history of the Western mind, his stature is almost too excessive to be borne.” Those of us fortunate enough to have discovered Rudolf Steiner understand that our seemingly hyperbolic assessments will elicit skepticism. If Rudolf Steiner was really such a towering genius, how can he remain widely unknown nearly a century after his death?

It has happened before. Aristotle was lost to the West for a millennium. The Catholic Church placed Thomas Aquinas on its Index of proscribed writings for half a century after his death. By the early nineteenth century,

J. S. Bach’s greatness needed to be rediscovered and reasserted by Mendelssohn. Van Gogh sold one painting during his lifetime. In retrospect, we shake our heads and wonder how such neglect can have happened. Yet it did. And in the same way, future generations will shake their heads and wonder at us.

Challenges

There are many reasons for the neglect, none of them good. Steiner fits poorly into the conventional categories of respect: ‘educator’; ‘artist’; ‘philosopher’; ‘public intellectual’; ‘theologian’; ‘historian’; ‘cultural critic’; ‘spiritual teacher.’ Steiner was all these things, yet none of these labels begins to capture the scope and spirit of his work. On the other hand, Steiner *seems* at first glance to be a figure one can dismiss quickly with a pejorative term such as ‘guru’ or ‘occultist’ or ‘mystic.’ But Steiner was in no way a ‘guru’: he rejected the concept of authority outright, defining anthroposophy (as he came to call his philosophy) from the very outset as a *philosophy of freedom*. Out of respect and enthusiasm, some anthroposophists may exhibit reverence towards Steiner’s person, but this is entirely contrary to his wishes and his own

style. There is barely a hint of personality in any of Steiner's writings or lectures, and his unfinished autobiography, which discusses mostly the other people and ideas he encountered early in his life, is impersonal to the point of blandness. Steiner did indeed affirm the reality of a spiritual world beyond normal consciousness, but if this makes him an 'occultist' and a 'mystic,' then so were Plato, Kepler, Emerson, Planck, and Newton.

Anthroposophy is rooted in the Idealism of thinkers such as Schiller, Hegel, Fichte, and especially Goethe. These are hardly obscure names, but they are not well known in the English-speaking world, and the spirit of German Idealism is contrary to the largely empirical, skeptical cast of Anglo-American thought. By the end of the nineteenth century, at the zenith of materialism, Steiner's initial attempts to establish himself, first within academic philosophy, and then the workers' education movement, both foundered on the same kind of skepticism, which had by then conquered the German-speaking world as well. Ideas that have become commonplace today, such as the reality of the unconscious, or the active role of the perceiver in constructing experience, were heresies in Steiner's youth. Even the circle of avant-garde artists that he joined next were so bound up in their own personalities and so much in the thrall of Naturalism that they proved incapable of following Steiner's attempts to develop the kind of spiritual art that would eventually emerge in Expressionist movements like The Blue Rider two decades later. The only group open to Steiner's ideas were theosophists, so he accepted their invitations to lecture, and eventually he agreed to serve as the Secretary of a new German section of the Theosophical Society.

In 1903, Steiner began to speak and write openly about his spiritual research. Yet even this theosophical phase lasted only a few years: by 1907, deep rifts had opened up between Steiner and the society's leadership, and by 1912, Steiner had resigned in dismay.

Unfortunately for Western readers, one



Ideas that have become commonplace today, such as the reality of the unconscious, or the active role of the perceiver in constructing experience, were heresies in Steiner's youth.

result of this episode is that the language of basic anthroposophy (before Steiner adopted that name) is suffused with Sanskrit terms from theosophy like 'arupa,' 'pralaya,' and 'devachan.' Two of Steiner's four 'basic books,' as they have come to be called, have overtly theosophical titles: *Theosophy* (although it is mostly about psychology), and *Die Geheimwissenschaft im Umriß*, a compendious counterpart to Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine*, long published in English under the fatally mistranslated title *Occult Science*. In his later works, Steiner developed a new vocabulary: e.g., the devachans give way to ontological realms of 'being,' 'revelation,' 'living working,' and 'finished work.' Such linguistic difficulties are surely one reason for the neglect of Steiner. But they are not a good reason.

Making the Esoteric Public

Another difficulty is that anthroposophy is, in every sense of the word, esoteric. It has its own vocabulary that needs to be mastered, but that is true of nearly everything worth learning. Theosophical terms aside, the language of anthroposophy is actually quite straightforward and intuitive, and, on the whole, Steiner writes and speaks lucidly. The real impediment is the ideas, which are often so novel that they make one's head spin. It is Steiner's *thinking* that is deeply and genuinely esoteric. Steiner was a visionary in the strongest sense of that term: he had developed a high degree of what is traditionally called clairvoyance. Steiner reported as facts things that most of us have not yet experienced (or lack the courage to report, or experience but do not understand). And he assures us that we all have the

capacity to experience these things ourselves.

One of Steiner's central teachings is that human culture was, until relatively recently, shaped by individuals – 'geniuses' and 'initiates' – who were inspired by their participation in a closely-held, esoteric knowledge that goes by many names. Mostly, Steiner follows the Greeks in referring to this

Anthroposophy is, in every sense of the word, esoteric. It has its own vocabulary that needs to be mastered, but that is true of nearly everything worth learning.

long-hidden knowledge as *the Mysteries*. In the opening pages of Steiner's first 'basic book,' *How to Attain Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*, Steiner describes a profound revolution that occurred towards the end of the nineteenth century: the time had come for the former secrets to be taught openly and become public knowledge, to the end of transforming all of culture. What once was the object of passive and semi-conscious revelation from without, should now be actively and consciously sought within. In the language of Romanticism (which foreshadowed the event), the mirror must now become a lamp. This is what Steiner meant when he substituted the word 'anthroposophy' [human wisdom] for 'theosophy' [divine wisdom], and what Owen Barfield must have had in mind when he titled a collection of anthroposophical essays *Romanticism Comes of Age*. The great avant-garde artist and anthroposophist Joseph Beuys was echoing Steiner when he adopted as one of his many mottoes, "Make the mysteries productive!"

Beyond Prolific

Another difficulty is the formidable scope of Steiner's work. If people who write a dozen books are 'prolific,' Steiner was something way beyond prolific. During a period when I was reading Steiner intensively over many months, my son gestured at the green, 200-page paperback with the word *Gesamtwerk* on the cover that he had often seen in my hand, sighed, and complained: "The book's not that big, Dad. How long can it take to read it?" I laughed, and showed him that it was the *catalogue* of Steiner's complete works in German, still incomplete at some 400 volumes, and that I had been checking off titles as I worked my way through them. The edition begins with 45 volumes of books, letters, and published essays, followed by 39 of public lectures, and then another 270 tomes of private lectures to members of the Theosophical and Anthroposophical Societies that were recorded stenographically. Several dozen volumes of his notes, sketches, paintings etc. conclude the complete edition as planned. Much remains

If people who write a dozen books are 'prolific,' Steiner was something way beyond prolific.



Perhaps the greatest hurdle to acceptance Steiner still faces is that he occupies the seemingly excluded middle ground between science and religion.

untranslated, and, to this day, many manuscripts still lie unedited and unpublished in the archives. Even the most ardent, lifelong student of anthroposophy, who can read Steiner in the original, must be resigned to dying without having read all of his work.

The problem of coming to terms with Steiner is compounded by the absence of a single, classic text, an *Interpretation of Dreams* or a *Critique of Pure Reason*, that epitomizes his thought. He spoke to many different audiences in many different idioms. His profoundest insights are in the private lectures, which have long been available to the public, but they presuppose mastery of the introductory books, and that is already a daunting task. For many people, it is the application of Steiner's insights in fields such as education or agriculture that will be most compelling, but these writings also presuppose a knowledge of the 'basic books,' each of which is very different from the others, and one of which presents a huge and challenging cosmology. In order to appreciate him fully, one needs to read Steiner widely. Thus it is that, when

asked how to begin studying Steiner, anthroposophists are sometimes at a loss for a recommendation. This is a genuine difficulty, but no excuse for neglect.

A Science of the Spirit

Perhaps the greatest hurdle to acceptance Steiner faced and still faces is that he occupies the seemingly excluded middle ground between science and religion. Steiner was himself a trained scientist, and he was deeply versed in both the history and the philosophy of science. But his own inner experiences confirmed to him the reality of the spiritual world, and he found there a rich field of phenomena that could be penetrated and understood by a researcher employing rigorous methods. The time has come, Steiner argued, when humanity must begin to transcend and supplant mere faith with, first, knowledge, and eventually direct experience, of spiritual realities. The mediation of this epochal transition is an important part of what Steiner meant by calling

Anthroposophy is compatible with many different religious traditions, but it is neither founded upon, nor reducible to, any combination of them.



For Goethe and Steiner both, the most precise scientific instrument is – the human being who has cultivated his or her faculties.

different religious traditions, but it is neither founded upon, nor reducible to, any combination of them. Raised in a family of freethinkers, Steiner took up spiritual research entirely out of his own inner impulses, and he sought to cultivate a free spirituality apart from any traditional religious institution. He also lamented the latent appeal to egotism in the evangelicals' focus on their own personal salvation.

Nothing about anthroposophy violates the spirit of modern science, which Steiner honors, but he rightly criticizes historical developments that arbitrarily restricted the ways in which science has come to understand itself and is practiced. Steiner reminds us that science is characterized (or should be) not by a predetermined set of permissible objects of inquiry, but rather by rigor, objectivity, and verification. The springs of modern science were clouded at their source by a desire to control nature, by unwarranted reductionism, and by the confusion of skepticism with

anthroposophy *spiritual science*. Partisans on both sides of this longstanding divide will inevitably be disappointed, but those who feel the pain of this deep wound in our humanity will gravitate towards anthroposophy.

Anthroposophy has little to do with religion, and everything to do with spirituality. To the partisans, this is either too subtle a distinction, or an irrelevant one. Steiner wrote and spoke a great deal about subjects usually reserved for theology, especially Christian theology. But his views are deeply ecumenical. What Steiner called "the Christ" is a high spiritual power transcending any specific religious creed or institution, and suffusing them all in subtle and complicated ways. Anthroposophy is compatible with many

rigor. Francis Bacon's triumphalist rhetoric would prove determinative: in his view the scientist should "omit no means of vexing" the goddess Natura, and "hound her in her wanderings." He imagines the scientist "leading to you Nature with all her children to bind her to your service and make her your slave." In the "Plan" of *The Great Instauration* (1620), Bacon boasts, "I do not propose merely to survey these regions in my mind, like an augur taking auspices, but to enter them like a general who means to take possession." Having treated nature as a slave and the spoil of war, is it any wonder that we are beset by ecological crises? Steiner foresaw them, and he offers solutions that go to the real root of the problem.

Following Descartes, modern science came to define its method arbitrarily as the elimination of all notions of causality but the mechanical, and to dismiss as "occult" phenomena that cannot be reduced. Hence, the Cartesians accused even Newton of having imported "occult qualities" into science, because his understanding of gravity and force implied no causal mechanisms. Unlike Descartes, the greatest scientists were not skeptics. Newton devoted as much time to Hermetic philosophy and theology as to math and physics. And Kepler (according to Kant, the most "acute" thinker who ever lived) claimed to have discovered, by his own intense efforts, the ancient wisdom that had been guarded and only partially revealed by Pythagoras and the Egyptian Mysteries.

Steiner worked out a scientific method for researching just those qualities, and his voluminous books, essays, and lectures report the results of his own noetic experiments. Steiner followed Goethe in recognizing that the perceiver is inextricably involved in the construction of experience; that all perception is already "theory-laden." For Goethe and Steiner both, the most precise scientific instrument is – the human being who has cultivated his or her faculties. Hence Goethe devised an alternative scientific method employing disciplined imagination, a rigorous science of qualities. The highest goals of science should be, not the disenchantment of nature to the end of controlling it, but rather the expanding of one's personal capacities in order gradually to enter into nature's wisdom. Like Goethe, Steiner felt that the ultimate goal of science should be *the transformation of the*

scientist. As Freud, Husserl, and other of Steiner's contemporaries would also argue, there is no reason in principle why scientific rigor cannot be extended to the facts of our inner life. The ultimate goal of science is *theory* in the etymological sense: *theoria* comes from the same root as 'theater,' and it describes a contemplative viewing of spiritual facts. Self-transformation through meditative contemplation of phenomena is not the antithesis of science, but rather its essence.

Expanding Consciousness

As Plato taught in his Allegory of the Cave, sensation and the passive, unreflected thought that is based on sensation – *doxa* – are but shadows cast by the light of a supra-personal thinking that is creative, vivid, and alive. Steiner followed the German Idealists and Romantics in calling this enlivened, intuitive thinking *Imagination*. But he went much further than the Romantics by exploring fully the *spiritual* realm of perception for which the organ of Imagination is framed, and even more so by developing yet higher modes of cognition, which he termed *Inspiration* and *Intuition*. One way to begin thinking about what Steiner discovered is to extend Plato's analogy: Inspiration is a high cognitive faculty of which our everyday feelings are but the shadow, and we see Intuition's shadow in our faculty of will. Our everyday awareness of feeling is dream-like, and consciousness sleeps deeply in our wills. But consciousness can be awakened even at these higher levels.

Like Freud and Jung, Steiner taught that the unconscious can – and must – become ever more conscious, and that there are rigorous ways of attaining such higher knowledge. Freud uncovered and explored a personal unconscious that he found to be vastly larger, more powerful, and more knowing than consciousness. He called it "hypermnestic" – a super-memory. Jung went further, and discovered compelling evidence of a trans-personal unconscious. To understand Steiner's spiritual psychology, one needs to extend these concepts greatly, in two dimensions: Steiner's "spirit" might be understood thus as the *unconscious of nature* and a *cosmic memory* of everything that ever happened. Like Plato, Freud, and Jung, Steiner describes a rigorous method whereby one can progress along the path to higher knowledge, and eventually verify for oneself what the initiate

has discovered and reported. This vast, cosmic unconscious can be opened up gradually through *meditation* – a word that comes from the Latin verb meaning, simply, 'to practice.' With practice and over time, everyone can develop these faculties of higher cognition. What could be more hopeful than the opening sentence of Steiner's first 'basic book': "Within every human being there slumbers a capacity to attain knowledge of the higher worlds."

Recovering the Wisdom of the Past

The results of Steiner's researches yielded many profound insights into human nature and the history of the world. First and foremost, Steiner recovered and explicated the ancient mystery-knowledge that human nature is triune, comprising not only body, but also soul and spirit. Over the centuries, as humanity sank ever more deeply into the material world, awareness of our higher nature steadily eroded. Steiner often referred to the Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 869 CE, at which it became heresy to talk of the human *spirit*, as an important milestone. Humanity sank ever further until, by the end of the 19th century, rampant materialism came close to destroying any sense of the reality of the human *soul* as well.

What could be more hopeful than the opening sentence of Steiner's first basic book?: "Within every human being there slumbers a capacity to attain knowledge of the higher worlds."

Steiner's first great mission was to fight this materialism, which he knew to be false from his own, direct experience. But he also taught that humanity could become fully autonomous only by enduring a long eclipse in which the spiritual world was hidden from view, allowing us to become fully awake and grounded in the physical world. Skepticism and materialism were the necessary means to a modernity that must ultimately transcend them. Now that its benefits have been conferred, materialism becomes detrimental, and humanity must begin to



Skepticism and materialism were the necessary means to a modernity that must ultimately transcend them.

seek its own higher nature and the right relationship to the macrocosm out of its newly acquired autonomy.

Evolution

But even this alternative view of modernity is only one brief chapter in a much larger story, which brings us to one of Steiner's greatest achievements and an overarching theme in his many books and lectures: his description of the *evolution of consciousness*. Within this rich account, Steiner does address what one might call the evolution of 'cosmic consciousness' over the vast time scale of all prehistory, but he devotes much more attention to recorded history. Both ends of the account are grand beyond imagining.

Steiner affirmed the reality of evolution, but not as Darwin understood it. He honored Darwin's theory, which was the inspiration and the precondition for Steiner's own research into what one might better term evolutionary cosmology. Darwin could see only a small part of Steiner's much larger picture. Steiner's most succinct account of this epic drama is to be found in Chapter IV of his last 'basic book,' *An Outline of Esoteric Science*, but it is surely one of the most complicated and difficult texts in all of his writings. Nevertheless, the main trajectory can be sketched in a few words. The same process Darwin describes from an earthly perspective as a gradually *ascending* evolution of increasingly complex biological forms, Steiner describes from a spiritual perspective as a gradual *descent* of spiritual entities into ever more adequate material vessels. In other places, Steiner offers additional perspectives on his cosmology, complementing the 'outer' view of the finished products in *Esoteric Science*, for example, with an especially sublime cycle of five short lectures offering, as it were, an 'Elohim's-eye view' of the same unfolding process. In Steiner's account, humanity was created from the top down, but it has evolved from the bottom up, over successive 'incarnations' of what is now the planet Earth. Evolution allows us to approach multiple goals: over many eons we have been guided from simplicity toward complexity, from unconsciousness toward consciousness, from passivity toward activity, and from necessity toward freedom. Having received the gift of wisdom, our task is now to internalize that wisdom and transform it into active love. The paradox of freedom implies that the further we progress

towards these goals, the less certain is the outcome of the process, which will increasingly be placed into our own hands.

Beginning in 1906, and then with increasing intensity over the next decade, Steiner traveled around Europe giving cycles of private lectures to members of the Theosophical Society, and later the newly-founded Anthroposophical Society, on nearly every aspect of cultural history in light of his spiritual research, and specifically, his insights into the evolution of consciousness. This awesome project of reinterpretation, which runs into thousands of lectures filling hundreds of volumes, is surely one of the greatest accomplishments in all of intellectual history, rivaled in its scope, rigor, and sheer brilliance only by Aristotle's and Aquinas' grand syntheses. To say even that Steiner rewrote history would be an understatement: it would be more accurate to say that he added a whole new dimension to historiography as such. The 'evolution of consciousness' as Steiner describes it transcends any mere 'history of ideas,' arguing that not only the content, but *the very structure of consciousness, the subject-object relationship itself*, has evolved radically over time. Steiner's full account is dispersed across numerous volumes, but, fortunately, Owen Barfield has provided us with a magisterial summary, interpretation, and original application of Steiner's ideas in his book *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*.

The Spiritual in Art

As that remarkable project unfolded, Steiner began to gravitate more and more strongly towards the arts. Indeed, this shift in focus became one of the main bones of contention between Steiner and the other theosophists. Against the objections of Annie Besant, Steiner tried to turn the Theosophical Congress of 1907 into an avant-garde arts festival; eventually, over four consecutive years in



Having received the gift of wisdom, our task is now to internalize that wisdom and transform it into active love.

Towards the end of his life, Steiner expressed some regret that he had not focused even more on artistic practice.



Steiner's first "Goetheanum" building: sculpted wood.

An important artist in his own right, Steiner also influenced many other major artists.

Munich, from 1910 to 1913, Steiner sought to guide the newly founded Anthroposophical Society by writing and directing four expressionist *Mystery Dramas* embodying many of his key insights. Towards the end of his life, Steiner expressed some regret that he had not focused even more on artistic practice. Blocked in his attempts to build a center in Munich, just before the outbreak of World War I, Steiner wisely accepted an invitation to build a headquarters for the Society on a site at Dornach, near Basel, Switzerland. In the turmoil after the war, which included a failed assassination attempt by proto-Nazis in 1921, Steiner moved the main locus of his own activity from Germany to Switzerland. The Nazis would later outlaw the Society and all its initiatives, but they survived in Dornach, which remains the international center of the anthroposophical movement. Over a decade beginning in 1913 he directed construction of a magnificent edifice, mostly carved out of wood, that hovered somewhere between architecture and sculpture, theater and temple. Together with the English sculptor Edyth Marion, Steiner himself carved a magnificent group of statues that were to be the focus of attention. He also designed and helped paint symbolic murals on the interior of its two interpenetrating cupolas. This *Goetheanum* was meant to stand as a work of art in its own right, and to embody Goethe's all-important concept of metamorphosis. But it was also meant to function (as its successor still does) as a stage for Steiner's own dramas, for uncut five-day performances of Goethe's *Faust*, other classic theater, musical concerts, and two entirely new art forms that Steiner developed: a dance-like art of movement he called eurythmy, and an art of recitation he called *Sprachgestaltung* or creative speech, which aim to make visible the inner gestures of music and language.

Steiner is widely recognized by art historians as a major architect. Sadly, his greatest masterpiece, the First Goetheanum (as it is now called), was destroyed by an arsonist on New Year's Eve, 1922/1923, but it was replaced by a Second Goetheanum of sculpted concrete, designed by

Steiner and completed after his death. Standard histories of art invariably describe it as one of the important monuments of twentieth-century architecture. Steiner's artistic work outside of architecture deserves to be much better known. An important artist in his own right, Steiner also influenced many other major artists, some very deeply, including Vasily Kandinsky, Arnold Schönberg, Andrei Bely, Viktor Ullmann, Bruno Walter, Saul Bellow, and Joseph Beuys.

Reincarnation and Karma

Only at the end of his life was Steiner able to devote full attention to the second great task of his professed mission: communicating the reality of reincarnation and karma in a form appropriate for the West. Surely, it is no accident that Steiner undertook this labor only long after his theosophical phase: Steiner's assertions bear scant resemblance to most oriental teachings, and he would not have wanted them to be confused. But an excellent (and necessary) introduction to the topic can be found already in a chapter of *Esoteric Science* called "Sleep and Death." It may have become a tired metaphor, but it is nevertheless true that sleep is a 'little death': every night in sleep, we leave our bodies to enter and commune with the spiritual world, only to forget the experience upon awakening. In the same way, we commune with spiritual beings during a longer interval in the spiritual world between incarnations, only to drink from Lethe, the river of forgetfulness, before being reborn. Both our death and our rebirth are, as Wordsworth claimed, "but a sleep and a forgetting." We are no more newly created at birth than we are upon awakening from sleep in the morning.

Reincarnation makes sense of the evolution of consciousness, and vice versa. But it also balances out the injustices of the seeming accidents of birth: class, gender, race, opportunity or its lack, living in a time of peace or hellish strife, experiencing the marvelous comforts and conveniences provided by technology, and so forth. According to Steiner, we typically alternate genders, and move from culture to culture across many

Together, reincarnation and karma deliver concrete justice – and mercy – in this world, rather than a vague promise of recompense in the next.

incarnations, absorbing (or at least being given the chance to absorb) the best that each culture has to offer. It is a deeply cosmopolitan vision: all of us, over time, wittingly or not, are gradually becoming citizens of the world and whole human beings. Capacities acquired through hard work (or suffering, or other trials) in one incarnation metamorphose into new talents in the next. Genius is no accident.

Together, reincarnation and karma deliver *concrete justice – and mercy – in this world*, rather than a vague promise of recompense in the next. Our labors come back as new capacities, but our failings and our misdeeds also come back to meet us in our next incarnation, confronting us as seemingly accidental encounters and outer events. By letting us experience on our own skins the consequences of our actions, and by giving us an opportunity to grow and to enact compensation, karma is an act of Grace, a higher lawfulness that allows us to make ourselves whole. Steiner warned that the laws of karma are immensely complex, and that karma is endlessly inventive, so he moved rather quickly from a set of lectures establishing some basic principles to a long series of examples from the biographies of real figures from history. The Greek counterpart to the Sanskrit word ‘karma’ would be ‘drama,’ and Steiner exhorted us to view our biographies as unfolding moral dramas, or to think of karma as a sculptor shaping our living clay. If, as Steiner asserted, “Karma is the greatest artist,” then our very lives must be the greatest works of art. Everything that we do, and everything that we suffer, has meaning.

A New Art of Education

In the aftermath of World War I, the social and political institutions that had failed so miserably crumbled away, leaving a terrible vacuum. The world cried out for renewal. During the last decade of Steiner’s life, anthroposophy gave birth to a wide range of ambitious practical initiatives that were meant to address the crisis. After hearing Steiner address his

As Steiner’s contemporary, the poet and esotericist William Butler Yeats put it so very well, “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.”



Waldorf education imposes many demands on class teachers, who must become ‘Renaissance men and women,’ mastering new material each year, and growing together with their class.

workers, an industrialist named Emil Molt, who owned the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory in Stuttgart, asked Steiner whether he could provide the workers’ children with an education more appropriate to their needs and to their humanity. Steiner agreed, subject to a set of conditions that were revolutionary for the time: the school would be co-ed; all students would be taught to the same, comprehensive curriculum; and the teachers would be given the final say in all pedagogical decisions. With Molt’s generous backing, Steiner opened the first Waldorf School in 1919, near the factory in Stuttgart. Nine years later, the first Waldorf school in North America opened in New York City. The movement continued to grow, and, despite having been banned by the Nazis (and the Bolsheviks), Waldorf schools have gone on to become the largest non-sectarian educational movement in the world, with more than 900 schools and 1,600 early childhood programs on six continents.

The foundations of Waldorf pedagogy are Steiner’s deep insights into human and child development, the changing role of the teacher, and a rich, holistic curriculum. Steiner understood that children learn very differently at each stage of development, and that real learning should be a gradual metamorphosis not just of thinking, but also of feeling, and of the will. As Steiner’s contemporary, the poet and esotericist William

Butler Yeats put it so very well, “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” Young children learn principally through imitation and play, and they learn best when one appeals to their imagination. Intellectual tasks (which even the youngest children can be made to perform – or rather, mimic) are best deferred until later, when the adolescent begins to develop real powers of abstract thinking, which can then be engaged directly in the high school curriculum. The foundation of cognition is play, and children who have not been allowed to play will become stunted adults – full of facts, perhaps, but lacking creativity. Young children learn chiefly through their wills, by *doing*. Then, as

the inner life of feeling matures into puberty and beyond, the arts become the main door to knowledge. Steiner also understood that real learning is never linear, but always dynamic. Rich experiences ripen in the unconscious, and then emerge years later as quite different capacities. For example, Steiner taught that the sense of artistic proportion gained by drawing and painting in adolescence will transform itself into sound judgment in the thinking adult.

Steiner prescribed that the class teacher stay ('loop') with the same group of children, usually from grades one through eight, after which experts teach specific disciplines such as math, English, or biology. He wanted elementary and middle school teachers to become, above all else, *experts on the group of children entrusted to them*. Waldorf education imposes many demands on class teachers, who must become 'Renaissance men and women,' mastering new material each year, and growing together with their class. He asked teachers to reflect each evening on their students and on themselves. Steiner's pedagogy is as much about the self-development of the teacher as the education of the student. But the heavy demands of teaching also bring great personal rewards and deep relationships with students that can last a lifetime.

Steiner gave the teachers of the first school a motto to guide them: "Receive the child in reverence; educate the child in love; send the child forth in freedom." Although it respects many religions, and has grown out of a reverential view of the world and the human being, the Waldorf curriculum is as little about inculcating any specific religious or spiritual doctrine as hospitals are about teaching their patients anatomy and physiology. At the heart of the curriculum is Steiner's view that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny – that the developing human being recapitulates in small the great, overarching evolution of consciousness that humanity as a whole has undergone. For the youngest children, the world is alive with magic; they live in a deep, dreamy sympathy with animals, plants, and stones. The curriculum feeds that con-

sciousness with archetypal myths and tales from many cultures. By the third grade, children have become in some real sense little monotheists; by the sixth, they have become Roman jurists. As they grow into autonomy, children experience their own inner Renaissance; Steiner identified this moment as the keystone of the entire curriculum. Adolescence is an age of Great Revolutions. Waldorf education seeks the students where they live, and it knows that these recapitulated experiences will emerge later as a very different, appropriately modern, set of capacities. By the time they enter high school, students are ready for the most rigorous intellectual work we can give them, and they are able to embrace it with a rich array of inner resources. In this way, the Waldorf curriculum seeks to provide, as one school describes it, a "contemporary classical education that engages not only the head, but also the heart and the hand; not just 'college prep,' but 'life prep'."

Steiner's social and political thought is difficult to characterize succinctly, not least because it cuts across conventional categories.



Steiner turns all conventional social theory on its head by claiming that altruism (fraternité) should be the guiding principle in the economic sphere.

Social Renewal

Waldorf education is currently the best-known aspect of Steiner's work, but few realize that it is only a small remnant of what was meant to become (and could still become) a much larger social program. Steiner called this in German, awkwardly, "soziale Dreigliederung," and the conventional English translation, "the threefold social order," is hardly more felicitous. Like so much of his other work, Steiner's social and political thought is difficult to characterize succinctly, not least because it cuts across conventional categories. Steiner's critique of laissez-faire capitalism parallels Marx's in many important regards, such as his insistence that human labor is not a commodity that can be sold, and that industrial life is alienating because it violates human nature itself. But Steiner looks more like a classic liberal in his insistence on the separation of the political realm (which he called "the sphere of rights") from both economics and culture (including both religion and education).

Steiner's role in the history of European socialism has not been appreciated. (Hints: it was

Steiner who gave the eulogy at the funeral in 1900 of Wilhelm Liebknecht, a founder of the most powerful social democratic party in Europe, and he was also chosen to give the keynote address to the workers at the huge celebration of the Gutenberg Quincentennial.) After World War I, Steiner emerged as a major political theorist and activist in his own right. He stepped into the vacuum created by defeat and the abdication of the Kaiser, arguing for what we now would call a ‘third way’ between capitalism and communism – an idea that would return later in the Prague Spring of 1968, which was much influenced by Steiner’s theories. Steiner published a manifesto that was signed by many notables, along with dozens of essays, and a book presenting his basic ideas in popular form. He gave lectures to workers’ committees all over Germany (it was after hearing one of these speeches at his factory that Emil Molt first approached him), coached and sent out teams of workers to publicize his ideas, and he even mounted a large-scale political campaign, hoping (but ultimately failing) to win outright in the plebiscite over Silesia’s new form of government.

Like much other radical political thought, Steiner’s begins with the inspired but misunderstood and misapplied ideals of the French Revolution: *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. But Steiner turns all conventional social theory on its head by claiming that altruism (*fraternité*) should be the guiding principle in the economic sphere. He argued that ever-increasing division of labor actually underscores the truth of this principle, because it means that more and more, we work not for ourselves, but for others. Altruism’s main practical form should be an “associative economics,” in which producers and consumers confer and cooperate to produce what is really wanted as efficiently as possible. A good example of this idea in practice would be “community farms” or CSAs, in which consumers buy shares, have a voice in deciding what will be grown, frequent the farm, and shield the farmers from the vicissitudes of weather and the market by guaranteeing their income. “Community-

supported agriculture” is now a large and varied movement in this country, but the concept was originally Steiner’s, and it was brought here by anthroposophists.

The “middle sphere” of rights and law should be governed by the principle of *égalité* or equality, and Steiner insisted unequivocally, at a time when many were unsure, that democracy is the only appropriate political form. This is the proper sphere of politics, and the only sphere in which

Steiner argues that money exhibits fundamentally different qualities as it circulates through the three spheres.



The “representative of humanity” from Steiner’s sculptural group.

In a healthy social order, it is not economic corporations, but rather ideas that should compete freely.

politics should be determinative; moreover, Steiner also locates here not only labor and the wages of labor, which he views as fundamental human rights, but also – even more surprisingly – money and banks, whose proper function is to allocate capital justly for the good of all. Steiner’s thoughts on money are fascinating: for example, he views it not as a universal exchange commodity, but rather a certificate of entitlement, and he argues that money exhibits fundamentally different *qualities* as it circulates through the three spheres. For Steiner, capital is born as *entrepreneurial idea and initiative* within the spiritual-cultural sphere, then manifests as *loan money* within the rights sphere, deploys itself as *purchase money* in the economic sphere, and ultimately yields revenue and profit to repay loans and support educational and cultural institutions with *gift money*, which allows the cycle to begin again. One practical outcome of Steiner’s thinking in this realm has been the creation of anthroposophical banks, which function more like non-profit foundations supporting worthy causes. Some of these banks publish regular newsletters, inviting depositors to choose among loan applicants who describe their projects.

For Steiner, freedom (*liberté*) should characterize not the economic, but rather the spiritual-cultural realm: in a healthy social order, it is not economic corporations, but rather *ideas* that should compete freely. Schools, churches, museums, universities, and other institutions belonging here should be shielded as much as possible from political and economic forces. Many different cultures should be allowed to flourish independently within each political entity. Ideally, cultural

institutions should be funded by free gifts, and they should be self-governing. In this sphere, the cultivation of each person's full creative potential should be an end in itself; schools are not for indoctrinating or even training: they are for *educating*. The Waldorf school movement is a shining example of these principles in action.

The Seeds of a New Culture

Anthroposophy has yielded many more initiatives during Steiner's lifetime and since. He worked with medical doctors to create new kinds of "anthroposophically extended" or "complementary" medicine: the movement remains small in North America, but it is fully developed in Europe, where numerous anthroposophical pharmacies, clinics, and even some hospitals have been founded. Weleda and Hauschka are respected international pharmaceutical firms; Uriel Pharmacy and TrueBotanica have been launched more recently in the U.S. Hauschka is now also considered by many to be the ultimate in cosmetics. Dozens of communities here and abroad, notably the Camphill movement, are working out of anthroposophical insights to meet the special needs of children and adults.

Steiner was indeed far ahead of the curve, and that is why he speaks so directly to so many issues with which we continue to wrestle today. His social theories have the potential to clarify current debates on globalization. Steiner laid much of the blame for World War I on the mistaken notion of 'national economy,' asserting that economics is inherently apolitical and global. He was an ardent feminist, arguing already in 1895 for full suffrage, and insisting that if there are "women's questions," then it is women who

Steiner was also an early and a profound ecologist. More than a century ago, he already warned that humanity's relationship to the Earth was in need of healing.



The second "Goetheanum": flowing reinforced concrete.

should answer them. Steiner was also an early and a profound ecologist. More than a century ago, he already warned that humanity's relationship to the Earth was in need of healing. In response, Steiner became a great pioneer of organic agriculture, devising "bio-dynamic" methods that are in use all over the world today. Biodynamic farms can be found in thirty U.S. states, and dozens of vineyards have switched to biodynamic production. Indeed, biodynamics is rapidly becoming as widely known as Waldorf education, and anthroposophy could potentially provide important theoretical and practical foundations not only for organic agriculture, but for the ecological movement generally. There have also been many attempts to bring Steiner's ideas to bear upon the world of business: major European companies such as Mahle, Altnatura, and Software AG have been founded by anthroposophists, and are run to varying degrees on anthroposophical principles. And anthroposophists can

point to decades of successful experience in the emerging field of social finance.

In a world in which so many ideologies – Marxism, nationalism, materialism, religious fundamentalism, the invisible hand of the market – have become tired if not outright destructive, many hunger for a radically new kind of thinking, for ideas arising out of new insights, ideas that have real transformative power. They yearn for ideas that can become real, living ideals. Steiner gave them to us in abundance, launching and inspiring a host of initiatives throughout the world.

Now a century old, anthroposophy feels young. Steiner remains seminal. He planted the seeds of a new, humane civilization. Let us cultivate them.



Frederick Amrine has been a student of anthroposophy his entire adult life. He teaches literature, philosophy, and intellectual history at the University of Michigan, where he has been appointed Arthur F. Thurnau Professor in German Studies. His research has been devoted primarily to Goethe, German Idealism, and Romanticism. He is also a past editor of this publication.