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Esotericism against Capitalism?

Rudolf Steiner's Reform Pedagogy as a Site of Resistance

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This article seeks a better understanding of how Rudolf Steiner envisioned his reform pedagogy as a site of spiritual learning (for example through art, seasonal festivals, ritual drama, etc.), but also as a specific site intended to resist the encroaching influence of capitalism, materialism, and corporatism spreading in Germany following the First World War. Steiner's ideas about education did not emerge in a vacuum. He was inspired by and connected with other forms of communist, socialist, and *Lebensreform* movements in his time. Yet Steiner more actively embraced and incorporated esotericism into his pedagogical project. How did his approach differ from the other anti-capitalist and anti-materialist-inspired schools that were spreading, and what role did esotericism play in terms of developing Waldorf students? This article explores these questions and contributes to a recontextualization of both Steiner and esotericism taking place in the academy.

Introduction

In recent years, Waldorf or "Steiner" education (named after its primary founder, Rudolf Steiner) has come under increasing scrutiny, including accusations of Eurocentrism, having *völkisch* tendencies and an esoteric or religious agenda, and failing to produce students who are scientific and technologically educated enough to adjust to (it must be said) a specifically Western/capitalistic vision of modern society (e.g. Williams 2019).[1] Those who have found value in Waldorf education have, of course, publicly defended it (e.g. Rawson 2019), and sometimes curricula have been modified in response to these criticisms (for an overview of the controversy, see Frielingsdorf 2012). In other cases, Steiner's insights have been integrated into formats that develop new models to better adapt to the times (e.g. Gordon and Cox 2024). However, the debate is increasing, without any foreseeable resolution. It is therefore instructive to revisit, in diverse ways, the historical context in which Rudolf Steiner, the founder of anthroposophy and the main initiator of Waldorf education, developed his pedagogical insights, and the relationship of these ideas to esotericism and revolutionary politics.

The generation to which Steiner belonged experienced the profound transformations that came with the emergence of European modernity and the chaos,

1 Other important examples include Jasper Lake's documentary *De utvalda barnen* (2021), which is mostly related to Sweden, and the episode of the Dutch documentary series *De Hokjesman*, "De Antroposofen" (2013).

confusion, and problems that accompanied Germany's becoming an integrated and technologically and politically powerful nation. This generation was faced with novel and unsettling advances made in science and technology that brought issues of truth and power, and the relationship between technical and humanistic knowledge, to the forefront of their minds. Steiner's interest in esotericism and romantic philosophy, as well as his experience of the horrors of modern capitalism and the First World War, led him to a reconsideration of the function of education. While the subject of pedagogy and teaching were always a part of Steiner's life, during this period he joined a growing number of dissatisfied social and political activists who were fed up with the current situation in Wilhelmine Germany. Like many other progressive reformers, Steiner proposed a new form of education as central to establishing a more egalitarian future:

> nothing can help today's education, nothing can elevate today's education to a better state, than if teachers will admit to themselves: "We have outgrown the conditions that have developed over the last three to four centuries. We were prepared in the same way as everything that has led humanity into such misfortune". And those who had been the educators of those teachers would also have to confess: "We have understood nothing other than to transfer to the teachers what has emerged from industrialism, from the state, from *capitalism*" … In other words, just as we demand a change, a transformation of the entire breadth of the social conditions of the present for the sake of the future, we must demand a new art of education, and we must demand a different foundation for this art of education! (Steiner 1998, 68; emphasis added. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from German to English by the author.)

This article argues against interpreting Steiner's reform pedagogy solely in terms of making a conservative move to preserve *Bildung* (e.g. Myers 2004) and instead invites scholars to see in his pedagogical ideas a response to the radicalization of students and related sociopolitical developments. A central concern of the radical student groups was the problem of modern capitalism and the mixing together of profits and intellectual activity – which was also a central concern for Steiner. Furthermore, one of these radical students, Walter Benjamin, had redefined *Bildung* in terms of its revolutionary and progressive political potential, as part of a "metaphysics of youth", in which *Bildung* was not only an individual process of self-formation but a collective process continuing across the ages (Reitter and Wellmon 2021, 190–92).

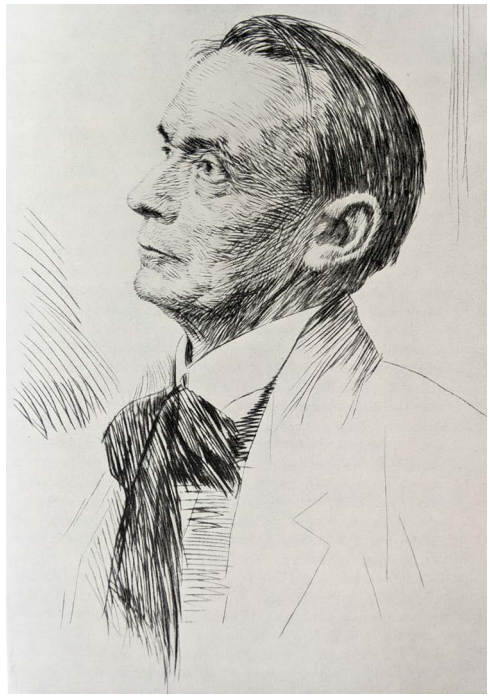
After all, Steiner had lectured at the Berliner Arbeiterbildungsschule, established by Wilhelm Liebknecht, the father of Karl Liebknecht, who was one of the principal founders of the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD). He even shared a lecture podium with Rosa Luxemburg to address a group of workers.[2] Steiner's

2 Steiner referred to this speech several times in 1919. Although he criticized the idea that all the proletariat needed to achieve success was to adopt a scientific orientation – i.e. "scientific socialism" – he nevertheless refers to Rosa Luxemburg as the one "who so tragically perished". Furthermore, the few letters from Luxemburg to Steiner in the Steiner archive in Dornach betray an entirely congenial and friendly exchange. It is therefore not exactly correct when Perry

intention had been to instruct the "mature men and women of the working class" – even if he did not necessarily subscribe to a Marxist view of history. For Steiner, one solution to the problem of modern capitalism involved establishing an autonomous education system and incorporating spiritual ideas into the new education models popular at the time among radical socialist and leftist reformers.

The origins of Waldorf pedagogy are thus intimately connected with the history of other radical political and reform movements that emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century in Germany, for example, *Lebensreform*, *Freikörperkultur*, *Freistudentenschaft* and the *Räteschulen*. All these movements included a radical progressive education or reform pedagogy (*Reformpädagogik*) as part of their political and cultural renewal programme. This article recontextualizes Waldorf education by grounding Steiner and his reform pedagogy in this radical sociopolitical milieu.

Firstly, this is done by offering an account of the historical background, especially the chaotic year of 1919 when the first Waldorf school was opened in Stuttgart and the effects of the November Revolution of 1918 were still reverberating. Secondly, new information and primary source material are provided to illustrate that Steiner was embedded in a radical socialist and communist context, and furthermore that while some rejected Steiner's ideas about education and political reform, many revolutionary radicals took Steiner seriously, despite what critics have claimed.[3] Finally, I argue that part of



Rudolf Steiner. Aaron French personal archive.

Myers suggests Steiner was unsympathetic to the radical communist voices in Germany at the time, such as Luxemburg. In fact, Steiner's point about a scientific orientation is that even if the proletarians were to adopt such a view, they would have in fact received it from the intellectual tradition of the bourgeois class: "And where did the proletarian get this [scientific] worldview from? Where did this scientific orientation stir from, which he [the proletariat] sometimes has to take up in an incorrect way? It is, after all, science. He took it from the old heritage of the bourgeois class. It arose out of the old worldview within the bourgeois class, during the transition to the newer machine and capitalist age, as machines and capitalism overpowered people" (Steiner 1977, 110–11; for Myers reference, see Myers 2020, 228).

3 Peter Bierl, Helmut Zander, Peter Staudenmaier, and Perry Myers have all, in one way or another, minimized Steiner's connection with the revolutionary socialists and communists who were Steiner's contemporaries and saw in him a potential ally; they have also insinuated that Steiner was unsympathetic to the proletarian cause (e.g. Bierl 1999, 107; Zander 2007, 1301; Myers 2020, 228). Staudenmaier, for example, claims that "Though Steiner tried to make inroads

what separated Steiner from other radicals was that he firmly believed esotericism was part of the resistance to modern capitalism. This is why, with the help of many others, he incorporated esoteric perspectives into his pedagogical reforms:

> It is not surprising that the majority of teachers today teach mechanically, for the study of human nature that comes from modern science – a science that emerged from the industrial, state and *capitalist* life of the last three to four centuries – is a dead science. … The study of human nature that we strive for here, that we want to become the art of teaching through the Waldorf school – this insight into the human being, this study of human nature – this leads to the essence of human nature in such a way that the knowledge itself produces enthusiasm, excitement, love, so that what enters our heads as specialized knowledge of the human being permeates our feelings and deeds. Real science [i.e. esoteric science] is not the dead knowledge so often practiced today, but such a knowledge that fills a person with love for the subject of that knowledge. (Steiner 1998, 75; emphasis added)

For Steiner, the socialist and communist projects of political and cultural reorganization were not enough to amend the problems facing this generation – nor those of future generations. Instead, certain insights developed out of the esoteric sciences had to be included. In other words, pure politics would not suffice. As will be shown below, Steiner therefore did not reject the revolutionary socialist politics of his contemporaries, nor did he seek to latch on to them to serve his own ends. He wanted these projects to succeed, but he believed success was only possible through the incorporation of a spiritual orientation, as evidenced by his reform pedagogy.

Reform pedagogy, free student organizations, youth movements

Generally speaking, reform pedagogy (progressive education, *Reformpädagogik*, *éducation nouvelle*) is rooted in the Enlightenment thinkers of the eighteenth century, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose *Émile, or Treatise on Education* (1762) introduced a novel conception of child development, and Friedrich Schiller, whose *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794) argued for the importance of cultivating artistic sensibility and aesthetic freedom. In part, these reform projects were informed by the increasing sense of alienation and estrangement in bourgeois society and, in Schiller's case, a feeling of disappointment associated with the perceived failures of political revolution (Kimball 2001). At the same time, reform pedagogy in Germany eventually became a counterculture movement that aimed to flatten social hierarchies and was often connected with progressive left-wing politics, for which progressive education served as a means to attain freedom and justice in society.[4]

> within working class institutions, his outlook was understandably not very popular among workers. The revolutionaries of the 1919 Munich council republic [Bavarian Council Republic] derided him as 'the soul-doctor of decaying capitalism' " (Staudenmaier 2009).

4 Reform pedagogy could be appropriated for authoritarian and rightwing purposes, of course, especially in the interwar period and World War II (e.g. Oelkers 2020).

The history of pedagogical reform in modern Germany is vast and complex (for a complete background, see e.g. Herrlitz et al. 2009; Röhrs 1998; Röhrs and Hess 1987). To offer a brief background, in the eighteenth century the Prussian state introduced its compulsory education model, among the first of its kind in the world, referred to as the *Volksschule*, a four-year primary school for all people. From this, a higher education model developed in the German states – which continued into the *Kaiserreich* – consisting of the *Hauptschule* (basic education for the working class) and the *Gymnasium* (wealthy elite education), the latter intended for the – mostly male – bourgeoisie (Tillmann 2012). In 1889, the Royal Decree (*kaiserlicher Erlaß*) issued by Kaiser Wilhelm II outlined the means by which the schools needed to be protected from socialism and communism (Schmelzer 1991, 26).

The success of the Prussian model was attached to the *humboldtsche Bildungsideal* (Humboldtian model of higher education), based on Wilhelm von Humboldt's vision of a neo-humanism privileging a holistic approach of self-development (*Bildung*) and predicated on the idea of academic freedom and the marrying of arts and sciences. The Humboldt University of Berlin was officially opened in 1810, incorporating this Humboldtian model, and it primarily served to bolster the expanding educated bourgeois class.

In the mid-eighteenth century, the *Realschule* (six-year secondary school) was formally added, functioning as the preparation for admission into a technical high school (*Oberrealschule*), and to be followed by a technical career or apprenticeship (in other words, intended for the working class). The *Realschule* was envisioned as developing technical alternatives to the classical education model. *Gymnasium* (grammar school), on the other hand, was preparatory for attending university proper and focused on the classical humanities (although the *Gymnasium* curriculum included technical sciences in a more theoretical sense). To this day, the education system in Germany remains in this mould and is referred to in terms of a "three-tiered school system" (*dreigliedrige Schulsystem*).

By the beginning of the twentieth century, reform pedagogy was often incorporated into the *Lebensreform* movement, which emphasized the idea that nature itself had instructive properties. The *Lebensreform* movement was a response to the industrial cities and their unhealthy living and environmental conditions. Nervousness, speed, overstimulation, and anxiety came to be associated with urbanized spaces (Killen 2006; Radkau 1998; Cowan 2008), galvanizing a counter-movement that was referred to as the *Naturmenschen*, a group of mostly young people who sought to "return to nature".

Also during this time, even as early as the 1890s, calls to reform the traditional and class-oriented education system increased, often coming from elementary school teachers joining together to form new associations (Lamberti 2002, 11). To a certain degree, the *Reformpädagogik* and *Lebensreform* movements overlapped in that both professed a common desire for "free" education that was open to all social classes and religious confessions. Often the rural environment served as an ideal space for such radical pedagogical practices, which is why many small schools opened their doors out in the natural environment, away from the watchful eyes of the cities. Such schools were referred to as rural education homes (*Landerziehungsheime*). At the beginning of the twentieth century, *Reformpädagogik* was sometimes formulated in terms of *neue Pädagogik* (new pedagogy), which

corresponds to the term progressive education in English. However, as Marjorie Lamberti points out, while many reformers were contemporaries of John Dewey, one of the founders of progressive education in America, the *Reformpädagogik* movement was more interested in ideas of child psychology and development that came from German thinkers and German history (Lamberti 2002, 2–3). Above all, the aim that could unite *Reformpädagogik* and *Lebensreform* was a resistance and hostility to dogmatic religious models of education that restricted freedom of thought and development.

Student associations soon emerged in connection with the universities, such as the *Freistudentenschaft* or Free Student Movement (FSM) (Wipf 2004; Reitter and Wellmon 2021, 185–97). The members of this movement were concerned, *inter alia*, about German universities graduating neither fully educated nor mature individuals, but rather technical specialists, *Fachmenschen* (Mommsen and Morgenbrod 1992, 50–69). These "specialists" could be fitted into the state apparatus as living parts and constantly replaced, like cogs in a factory machine. The FSM wanted to free themselves from the *Corps*, so-called *Corpsbrüder*, who made up the older, more conservative student unions and regularly engaged in heavy drinking, brawling, sexist and exclusionary practices, and tended to be nationalist in focus (Graf and Hanke 2020, 44).

In the past, scholars criticized aspects of the reform groups and movements as anti-modern, as reactionary, seeking to return to an alleged pre-modern paradise (Bergmann 1970; Mosse 1981; Stern 1961). More recently, however, it has been

Free German Youth Day, 1913.

suggested that these groups were often made up of progressive or radical individuals who were unable to cope with the economic and social changes accompanying Europe's transition to modernity, particularly global capitalism, which in their view turned individuals into mindless bourgeois consumers trapped in a dog-eat-dog scramble for wealth and privilege (Dickinson 2010). Jon Savage has described how rebellious teenagers who wanted to escape the rigid, traditional, and materialistic mentality of their bourgeois parents joined such groups as a means of escaping their oppressive families (Savage 2007, 101–08). By renouncing a society of tradition, industrialization, nationalism, and militarism, *Naturmenschen* and rural educators entered a parallel social community, one that was "wild" and "natural", where experimentation and alternative lifestyles were permitted, including male bonding, homosexuality, gender equality, and eroticism.

One branch of the back-to-nature movement known as the Wandervögel (free birds) was founded in 1901 by Karl Fischer, a student at the Gymnasium Steglitz in Berlin. It began as a committee for school trips for students to develop outdoor skills and commune with nature through hiking and singing. The movement spread through Wilhelmine Germany and was influential in the formation of new social values and cultural practices, offering a liberating experience in the face of constraining family and educational institutions. Savage points out how this movement went hand in hand with a sense of freedom and the desire to return to nature-worshipping paganism (Savage 2007). Moreover, this impulse was part of what became known as *Freikörperkultur* (free-body culture), the belief that nudity, in a communal setting in nature, accessed a more "natural" way of living.

Reform pedagogy projects incorporated most of these elements, including novel approaches to education that took into account new scientific and psychological findings, such as those of Sigmund Freud and Charles Darwin. One of the most important examples of a popular and well-known reform pedagogue of the time is Gustav Wyneken, who was very active in the FSM, as many of his protégés went on to become university students who were themselves active in the movement (Werner 2021; Werner 2003; Dudek 2009). Wyneken and other reformers founded the Freie Schulgemeinde in Wickersdorf in the Thüringer Wald in 1906, a rural educational reform school that focused on movement, physical culture, and gender equality. The focus on developing artistic skills especially in a rural environment was crucial to these reform pedagogy projects, as well as an opposition to the authoritarianism and militarism of the Prussian model. This included sexual education (or eros pedagogy), manual labour, a democratic organization – typically private and not state-controlled – and a focus on children's rights (Kleinau 2018).

1919: upheaval and revolution

By 1918, government, economy, and culture had become hopelessly entangled in Imperial Germany. Following the disaster of the First World War, reform pedagogy took on an even more radical political dimension. In 1919, the German political activist and writer Alexander Schwab published an article entitled "Schulprobleme in der Revolution" in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, the academic journal edited by Max Weber, Edgar Jaffé, and Werner Sombart, in which he laid out the conditions for a free and autonomous school system within the context of the German revolutionary socialist state

(Schwab 1919). Schwab was a member of the FSM and the Deutsche Jugendbewegung (German youth movement), which had members across the country involved in challenging and reforming the sclerotic Prussian system.

Under the direction of Wyneken, Schwab had taught at the Freie Schulgemeinde in Wickersdorf (Kerbs 2007). Schwab's ideas, whether political or pedagogical, were radical and would land him in trouble with authorities throughout his life (he later died in the Zwickau concentration camp). His pedagogical reforms constituted, among other things, a resistance to the increasing adaptation to capitalism of the German economy through various forms of technical specialization, professionalization, and economization – what he referred to as the *Berufsproblem* (professional problem) in the school system, which he viewed as facilitating the capitalist take-over of Germany: "This problem of balancing work and life, of specialist training and general education is part of the professional problem" (Schwab 1919, 631).

Schwab argued in favour of intellectual freedom and the unification of knowledge in the humanities and sciences. He was against any form of specialization and professional activities as a goal in their own right. This problem was most pronounced in the intellectual professions (*Berufe*), a staple of the bourgeois class, which had become unethical by mixing together profit and intellectual activity. Above all, the socialist-led school programme should be based on an "autonomous education system" (*Autonomie des Bildungswesens*) and focus on removing the education monopoly of those in power (Schwab 1919, 649, 658).

Some of Schwab's writings provoked the Freistudentische Bund, Landesverband Bayern (the Bavarian section of the FSM) to organize a lecture series in Munich, which took place under the title "Geistige Arbeit als Beruf" (spiritual or intellectual work as a profession). The Bavarian students invited the sociologist Max Weber, who delivered his famous "Beruf" or "vocation" lectures in 1917 and 1919 (Tribe 2018). Schwab – who was a student of Weber's brother, Alfred Weber – had attacked the notion of vocation (*Beruf*) in his writings, which, like other communists and socialists, he associated with the bourgeoisie and implicated in the Western capitalist project. The concept, as well as its operation in society, needed to be dispensed with. As Keith Tribe points out, based on Schwab's articles the lecture series was intended to address the "restoration of a natural relationship between life and *Geist* that had been destroyed by the modern bourgeois world", in which "the acquisition of money and intellectual activity were linked, as in a *Beruf* [or vocation]" – or, in English, we might say a specialization (Tribe 2018, 128).

A close associate of Schwab was the teacher Frida Winckelmann, who had taught at a girls' school in Berlin before leading a rural education home (*Landerziehungsheim*) in the Schloss Drebkau near Cottbus. In 1911, she established her own reform education school in her house in Birkenwerder, which focused on children with intellectual and developmental disability. Karl Liebknecht, the renowned communist leader, had his three children educated there, and a number of Winckelmann's students in fact belonged to fellow comrades (*Genossen*). Rosa Luxemburg and other prominent revolutionary social communists, such as Karl Radek and Hermann and Käte Duncker, were also regular visitors (Kuckuk 2009, 20–25). Winckelmann was a social democrat who eventually became a member of the Spartacus League and then joined the Independent Social

Democratic Party of Germany (USPD) in 1917 and the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) in 1920. She was also employed as Luxemburg's secretary for a time (Stange 2006). Together, Winckelmann and Schwab (and others) founded a "workers' school" (*Arbeiterschule*), the Free University Community for Proletarians (Freie Hochschulgemeinde für Proletarier), from which emerged the Council School of Greater Berlin Workers (Räteschule der Groß-Berliner Arbeiterschaft) in the fall of 1919, which closely collaborated with the revolutionary Berlin council movement (Weipert 2023, 223; Kerbs 2007, 770–71). The courses, which covered a variety of subjects, were open to all workers earning a wage, but the main audience was the council members. The school was completely autonomous, self-governing, and organized around grassroots-democratic principles as a "community of equals" (Weipert 2023, 224). Newspaper advertisements announced the school as follows:

> The Council School of Greater Berlin Workers is your school. All its work is orientated towards the conduct and aims of the class struggle. If you want to conquer [the means of] production, you must learn how to use the power that you want to take in your hands effectively. (Weipert 2023, 223–24)

The workers' schools were part of the *Räteschulen* or council schools, which must be seen in the context of the revolutionary council movement, especially the November Revolution that broke out in November of 1918 at the end of the First World War, when the sailors in the north mutinied and rebellion quickly spread across Germany. The council movement was based on councils or *Räte*, that is, elected bodies of workers and soldiers and sailors, and the council schools, or *Räteschulen*, were part of this (Peterson 1975; Adler 1996; Weipert 2023). The Russian term "soviet" means "council", and the biggest role model for this movement was the Russian Revolution – which had taken place the year before – and the role the councils had played for the demonstrators in that revolution. The council movement was a grassroots democratic movement, which would eventually be referred to in terms of a *Räterepublik*. In reality, there were several separate council republics operating in Germany, which included the council schools or *Räteschulen*. These schools were composed of idealistic people attempting to set up and run self-governed schools in a very chaotic situation and a society that was essentially breaking down, and they were quite popular. The central ethos of the schools was in direct opposition to the Prussian authoritarian education system that had preceded them.

The KDP was officially established on 1 January 1919, and led by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. It represented a merger of the Spartacus League and other smaller revolutionary leftist groups who had opposed the war. This eventually sparked the so-called Spartacist Uprising (Spartakusaufstand), a power struggle between the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), which supported social democracy (and had supported the war), and the Communist Party of Liebknecht and Luxemburg, which supported the establishment of a socialist council republic (and had opposed financing the war). Over the course of these violent uprisings, Liebknecht and Luxemburg would be murdered by the *Freikorps*, almost certainly with the approval of the governmental hierarchy of the SPD (Gietinger 2019).

While Schwab had served in the war, he was disillusioned and after being discharged

became a staunch opponent of German militarism. In 1917, he joined the USPD, as well as the Spartacus League in 1918. He was friends with Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, and also Frida Winckelmann – with whom he would found the Berlin *Räteschule* – and was among the founding members of the KPD. When the Nazis seized power in 1933, there were at least thirty-three *Räteschulen* in Berlin alone, nearly all of which had strong socialist leanings and grassroots origins. The new Nazi government shut all of them down almost immediately.

Steiner and radical pedagogy

The most significant application of Steiner's anthroposophical philosophy was in the Waldorf schools, the first of which was opened in Stuttgart in 1919. These schools went on to become the most successful aspect of Steiner's legacy, with current schools spanning the globe (Oberman 2008). Steiner envisioned the curricula of these schools as promoting the free and autonomous spiritual life (*Geistesleben*) of the students and reducing over-reliance on top-down authority, especially from the state (Oberski 2011; Muñoz 2016, 2020). In Steiner's own words: "This requires that the educator, above all, knows how to direct ethical education in such a way that once the student has outgrown education, he can experience and feel himself in all directions as a completely free being" (Steiner 1979, 32).

Steiner was in possession of Schwab's article on the school problem in the revolution, which he annotated extensively.[5] Wenzel Götte has argued that Steiner's annotated copy, still held in the Rudolf Steiner Archive, is an important source that shows how much Steiner took an interest in the reform pedagogy of his time (Götte 2000, 156–57), especially regarding organization and autonomy in the education system, replacing the director's role with a democratic school management and the freedom to create own's own curriculum and bring together humanistic and scientific knowledge. Götte reads Steiner's annotations of this text as evidence of those aspects of Schwab's thought in which Steiner took an interest. This included a "planned early development of all abilities of the entire spiritual organism" founded on a principle of "learning by doing and for doing" (Schwab 1919, 645). Steiner further underlines Schwab's mention of Gustav Wyneken's *Freie Schulgemeinde*, where children were granted educational opportunities regardless of class and state oversight was restricted in favor of internal organization based on the workers in the school (Schwab 1919, 648).

Steiner, of course, would include esoteric and spiritual ideas in the curriculum and learning plan, for example, specific art forms, seasonal festivals, ritual dramas, and a focus on cosmically aligned stages of human development, all of which were predicated on an esoteric science. These additions, for Steiner, were part of the resistance to the failing education models and the encroaching economization of the school system. After all, he had been extremely successful as a teacher in the Berlin workers' school, so when he established the first Waldorf school he was able to combine three things: his experience as a personal tutor, which he had been during his days in Vienna at the *Technische Hochschule*; as an instructor in the Berlin workers' school; and as a personal

5 I have examined the original copy of the Schwab article in the Rudolf Steiner Archive in Dornach, and in my opinion the annotations match almost exactly annotations made by Steiner in other books in his personal library.

spiritual guide in the Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society.

Götte points out that Steiner's educational ideas had been outlined earlier, and that an initiative to found a school began already in 1918, that is, before the publication of Schwab's article, which Steiner possessed. Götte further adds that Steiner criticized aspects of the socialist school project elsewhere regarding the role of the state and the economic system (Götte 2000, 156–57).[6] Indeed, as early as 1907, Steiner had published an essay in the theosophical journal *Lucifer-Gnosis* entitled "Die Erziehung des Kindes vom Gesichtspunkte der Geisteswissenschaft" (The Education of the Child from the Perspective of Spiritual Science), which described the stages of child development in connection with the human subtle bodies of theosophy (Steiner 1987a, 309–44). In part, the focus on esoteric concepts in relation to education is one of the main features of Waldorf pedagogy that distinguishes it from other reform pedagogy movements. At the same time, the Schwab connection represents a crucial reference, connection, and parallel direction between Steiner and the goals of socialist reform pedagogy movements.

The copy of the Schwab article in the Rudolf Steiner Archive has an inscription that reads "für Frau Hauck" on the title page. Steiner would hold at least seventy meetings with the faculty of the first Waldorf school from 1919 to 1924, and during the nineteenth meeting on 22 September 1920, one of the faculty asks who is going to teach the handwork lessons. Steiner suggests someone he knows named Hedwig Hauck, the daughter of the professor of mathematics Guido Hauck, who had taught at the technical university in Berlin (Steiner 1975, 225–26). Steiner explains that if Hauck would be inclined to teach the handiwork, this would be an excellent choice. However, he says, she is currently working for a workers' school (*Räteschule*) in Berlin, and he is considering not asking her because it would "be good if she taught the people there", that the workers' schools think the workers only need to learn revolution but in reality they also need to learn things like geometry, which Hauck was teaching them. However, it is ultimately decided that they would telegraph Hauck the next day.

Hauck had met Steiner around 1908 during a lecture, where he told her that her father's book on *Faust* was one of the best on the subject. Based on this meeting, she joined the Theosophical Society in 1909 (Husemann and Tautz 1979, 167–75). Later, in 1918, she assisted Steiner in coming to Berlin to lecture and organize eurythmy performances. Then, in 1919, she was offered a job teaching geometry at Schwab and Winckelmann's Räteschule der Groß-Berliner Arbeiterschaft. Hauck was interested in the proletariat, as well as in Steiner's idea of social three-folding (explained below), but she was anxious about her own teaching abilities regarding this position. She therefore travelled to Stuttgart to ask Steiner for advice, and he assisted her in acquiring a better understanding of technology by recommending several books, which he read and discussed with her.[7] He encouraged her to go back to Berlin and to teach in the *Räteschule*, although, he said, you likely won't get a lot

6 See, for example, volume 24 in the Rudolf Steiner *Gesamtausgabe*.

7 Steiner did something similar for Ita Wegman when she was going through medical school in Zürich and having difficulty mastering the material to pass the exams (Wendt 2023, 110).

of joy out of it (Husemann and Tautz 1979). He was perhaps recalling his experience teaching at the workers' school in Berlin and the challenges he faced there. At the same time, Steiner was deeply affected by the social conditions of the underprivileged (proletariat) class, having come from poorer origins himself.[8]

Hauck returned to Berlin and accepted the position, and the workers loved her, even though, she claims, she did not belong to their party. However, in the Rudolf Steiner Archive there are unpublished letters between Hauck and Schwab. At that time, Schwab was the head of the school and essentially Hauck's boss.[9] Schwab addresses her as "Liebe Genossin", the communist greeting going back at least to the 1860s. In these letters, the two appear to be discussing Steiner, among other things, and the possibility of Steiner coming to give a lecture at the *Räteschule*, with Schwab granting her permission to "announce the lecture". Whether or not this actually happened remains unknown.

But with the increasingly turbulent situation in Berlin, Hauck eventually returned to Dornach for the opening of the Goetheanum and Steiner gave her the handicraft position at the Waldorf school in Stuttgart, which she started on 1 November 1920 – the same month the *Räteschule* in Berlin was actually dissolved (Weipert 2023, 224). Among other things, she focused on teaching the craft of knitting, for this kind of handicraft was thought to strengthen the connection between the material and the spiritual in Steiner's esoteric philosophy, a unification of theory and practice. In the faculty meetings that year, Steiner remarks that he had wanted Hauck to teach the handiwork lessons "so that the handicrafts would be artistic" (Steiner 1975, 241). Hauck went on to publish a book on handiwork and knitting based on the notes she prepared with Steiner, and much of the knitting work that exists in Waldorf schools today is indebted to her influence (Hauck 1993).

Steiner had further connections with radical students in Munich, such as Erich Trummler and Robert Wolfgang Wallach, who both held spiritual ideas, not only on culture and society, but on education. The weekly newspaper *Süddeutsche Freiheit*, which appeared in 1918–19 during the short-lived Bavarian Council Republic, published Steiner's announcement (likely with Wallach's help) "An das deutsche Volk und die Kulturwelt!", detailing the theory of "three-folding of the social organism" – Steiner's proposal for a new organic society formed by separating the spheres of economic, political, and religious/cultural life (Schmelzer 1991). Steiner had attempted to promote his idea of social three-folding already during the war, but much less publicly (pp. 52–70). After the war, "An das deutsche Volk" appeared in newspapers across Germany, but the fact that it was published in *Süddeutsche Freiheit* – a brief rebel newspaper that was established and contributed to *by* the revolutionaries (Wallach being among them), who were *actively engaged* in revolution – is significant.

8 For example, in the midst of a discussion in 1919, after being challenged on his position regarding the proletariat, Steiner exclaimed: "Who is actually allowed to count himself among the proletarians? … I struggled through for years by talking to the proletarians, working with the proletarians, starving along with the proletariat. I didn't 'ask postal workers how much they had, in order to be able to starve to death,' but I myself had to starve with them" (Steiner 1977, 166–67).

9 These letters were personally examined by the author.

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Anita Augspurg in her home in Munich, 1899. Atelier Elvira, *Die Woche* 1899.

The Bavarian Council Republic was proclaimed in April but by May it had been quashed by the *Reichswehr* sent from Berlin (likely by the SPD). Also in April, Steiner and his supporters founded the Bund für Dreigliederung des sozialen Organismus in Stuttgart, and Steiner published *Die Kernpunkte der sozialen Frage in den Lebensnotwendigkeiten der Gegenwart und Zukunft* (later published in English as *Basic Issues of the Social Question*), a book that many socialist revolutionaries and radical students, including those in Munich, took an interest in. In July, the *Dreigliederung des Sozialen Organismus* newspaper appeared, and Wallach contributed at least two articles, in which he emphasized the importance of the spiritual for the socialist and the proletariat cause (Wallach 1919).[10]

10 In 1923, Wallach was in Stuttgart with Steiner and central to the meetings of the Bund für Dreigliederung des sozialen Organismus, and his concerns were still about the current situation of the youth (Steiner 1991, 417).

Wallach's close friend was Erich Trummler, another student active in the radical scene in Munich. Trummler had set up his own close circle of students called Die Werkschar (not to be confused with the later Nazi group of the same name). Trummler was a lifelong advocate of education renewal, and he was interested in spiritual things and, like Wallach, would become a dedicated student of Steiner. Trummler attended Steiner's 1919 lecture in Stuttgart for the opening of the first Waldorf school, although he had already encountered Steiner in Munich in 1918. When he later emigrated to England in 1922, he helped to organize Steiner's lecture series in Oxford on the subject of spiritual education renewal. Trummler would go on to be a major leader in the Waldorf movement, not only in Germany and Switzerland, but also in Norway (Christensen 2003).

There are further connections worth considering. In Munich at this time lived the radical political and feminist activist Anita Augspurg, who founded her own journal in

1919 entitled *Frauen im Staat*. In issue 8/9, Augspurg offered a full write-up on Steiner's idea of social three-folding, which she characterized as extremely promising: "One of the most fruitful ideas for the reform of human coexistence is undoubtedly that given by Rudolf Steiner in his three-folding of the social organism" (Augspurg 1919a). This contribution by Augspurg is followed by a five-page detailed glowing review of Steiner's *Die Kernpunkte der sozialen Frage* by Carla von Parseval (perhaps a pseudonym for Augspurg). Further positive commentaries by von Parseval regarding Steiner and anthroposophy appear in later issues, at least as late as 1921, including a commentary on Steiner's "Vorträge über Volkspädagogik" in Stuttgart in 1919. In one editorial, Augspurg cites Lucifer and Ahriman together – two esoteric concepts taken from Steiner's anthroposophy – as among the causes for the present dreadful conditions (in a metaphorical sense), suggesting Augspurg was well acquainted with Steiner's ideas (Augspurg 1920, 2). Each issue of *Frauen im Staat* featured extensive reports on the women's movement, socialist and communist political developments, anti-militaristic and pacifistic assertions, and a recurring section on "new education" (*neue Erziehung*).


DIE FRAU IM STAAT

EINE MONATSSCHRIFT – HERAUSGEBER: DR. ANITA AUGSPURG UND LIDA GUSTAVA HEYMANN

Erstes Jahr — Achtes u. Neuntes Heft

INHALT

Anna Shaw †. / Dr. A. Kamienna: Was sollen wir Frauen im Kampfe zwischen Arbeit und Kapital? Dr. Anita Augspurg: Rudolf Steiners Dreigliederung des sozialen Organismus. Carla von Parseval: Über die Broschüre Dr. Rudolf Steiners: Kernpunkte der sozialen Frage in den Lebensnotwendigkeiten der Gegenwart und Zukunft. Lida Gustava Heymann: Internationale Arbeiterkonferenz. Anatole France: Den echten Erziehern! Christal Macmillan: Eine Abordnung zur Friedenskonferenz nach Paris. Julius Zerfaß: Die Mütter der Zukunft. / Magdalene Kind: Der Tod. Lucy van Jacoby: Ein Gartenreformator Myrrha Tunas: Archaeopteryx III. / Kurze politische Nachrichten. / Völkerverhändigung. Neue Erziehung Bücherbesprechung. / An unsere Leser!

MÜNCHEN 1919

VERLAG: „DIE FRAU IM STAAT", ANNA DONNER
MÜNCHEN, WOTANSTRASSE 26c

Die Frau im Staat, 1919.

Augspurg was personally active in the revolution and the proclaiming of the Bavarian Council Republic. She collaborated with Kurt Eisner as a member of the provisional Bavarian parliament after

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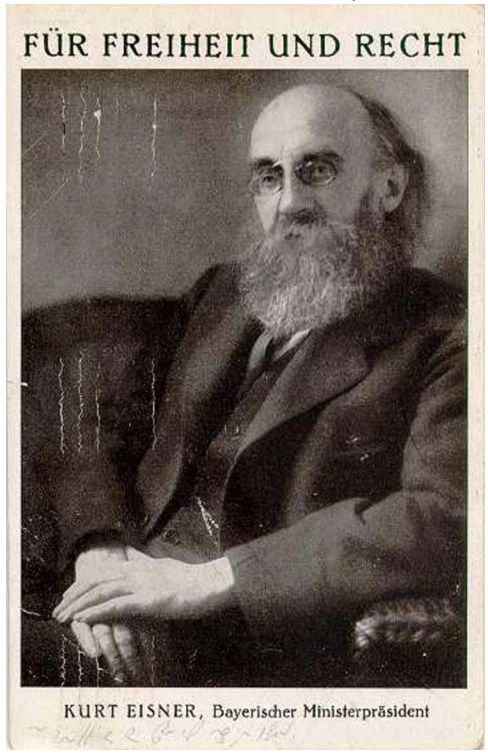

Kurt Eisner, Minister President of the People's State of Bavaria (8.11.1918–21.2.1919), circa 1919.

the overthrow of the monarchy, and she opposed the anti-Judaism and the nationalist groups that would eventually develop into Nazism. Eisner was of Jewish origin and served as the leader of the Republic until his assassination in Munich on 21 February 1919. Several days prior to his assignation, Eisner was in Bern, Switzerland, to speak at the Arbeiter- und Sozialistenkonferenz der Zweiten Internationale on 3–10 February. Augspurg attended the conference, as well, organizing her own Internationale Frauen-Friedenskonferenz to overlap on 11–12 February (Augspurg 1919b, 8–10; Deich 2008, 71–72).

Steiner was aware of Eisner and respected him, even sending him a personal copy of his *Philosophie der Freiheit* (*Philosophy of Freedom*) early on in 1893 (Steiner 1987b, 194–95), a book Steiner

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Revolution in Munich, 1918.

considered his most prized philosophical work. He even suggested Eisner as a potential "workers' leader" (*Arbeiterführer*) for his social three-folding movement (Boos 1972, 226). On 8 November 1918, when Eisner proclaimed the Bavarian Council Republic, there was an attempt on the same day to arrange a meeting between Eisner and Steiner (from the side of the three-folding movement); however, this unfortunately was not realized (Wiesberger 1969, 14). The meeting only took place later, when Steiner attended the Arbeiter- und Sozialistenkonferenz der Zweiten Internationale in Bern and discussed with Eisner the question of German guilt (*Schuldfrage*) following the war (Wiesberger 1969, 23–24; Lindenberg 1997, 652). After learning of Eisner's assassination only a few days after this meeting, Steiner referred to his death as a tragedy (Steiner 1989, 84).

These connections, while partly forgotten nowadays, were much better known in Steiner's time. For example, in the United States National Archives, certain files from the US Army Military Intelligence Division (MID) mention Steiner by name, and declassified reports show that Steiner was being monitored during the First World War and after (French 2022, 116–20).

Steiner's name is linked to a 1920 report (MID 1920; contents now unfortunately missing)[11] entitled "Union of Revolutionary Socialistic Intellectuals", which is a reference to the group "Bond van Revolutionair-Socialistische Intellectuelen (BRSI)", a socialist movement co-founded in the Netherlands in 1919 by Bart de Ligt (Brolsma 2015, 18, 21, 120, 190–93). A pamphlet from this group, published in 1919 and held in the Centraal Museum Utrecht, outlines the goals of the movement and lists its members and supporters, mostly artists,

11 The "cross reference card" lists Steiner as "an exponent" of the "Union of Revolutionary Socialistic Intellectuals", suggesting it might be a radical group formed in Italy (although this is incorrect).

writers, educators, and innovators.[12] One of the supporters listed is Henriëtte Moulijn-Haitsma Mulier, a poet and translator of Shakespeare, and the wife of the symbolist painter Simon Moulijn (whose name also appears). Henriëtte Moulijn-Haitsma Mulier had been introduced to anthroposophy by her friend Johanna Hart Nibbrig-Moltzer (Veldhuizen 2015, 201). Moulijn regularly published articles in the Dutch anthroposophical journal, *Anthroposophie. Maandblad voor sociale, paedagogische en geesteswetenschappelijke Vraagstukken* and was active in the Dutch socialist milieu. In her lectures and articles, she compared and contrasted the philosophies of Marx and Steiner, as well as Marxist socialism and Steiner's social three-folding (e.g. Moulijn 1923, 101–08; Veldhuizen 2015, 198–201, 341n125). In other words, she introduced anthroposophists to the ideas of Karl Marx and socialists to the ideas of Steiner.

In the end, it seems anthroposophy gained the upper hand, as Moulijn left her more radical aspirations behind. Nevertheless, considering that Steiner had other major connections in the Netherlands, including Ita Wegman, Elisabeth Vreede, and Frederik Willem Zeylmans, his influence in the socialist and reformist milieu in that region is under-appreciated. Given that the US Army Military Intelligence Division linked Steiner to these radical circles in the Netherlands – probably based on their informants – more attention is warranted, especially regarding parallels between Waldorf and alternative socialist pedagogies.

To illustrate how much people in the Unites States took an interest, an article that appeared in 1919 in a United States newspaper warned of a communist-socialist take-over happening in universities in

12 The pamphlet is digitized and accessible on Centraal Museum Utrecht website.

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Henriëtte Haitsma Mulier, 1924. Rijksmuseum, the Netherlands.

the Netherlands. The author of the article, which bore the catchy title "Dutch Universities are Honeycombed with Bolshevism", reports that:

> a "bond" or union of revolutionary socialist intellectuals has been inaugurated and the names of the members of the executive board have been published [Bond van Revolutionair-Socialistische Intellectuelen]. This union works in conjunction with communistic teachers' organizations and revolutionary socialist students' organizations in Holland. From persons whose sons are studying in the Dutch universities I learn that many students are imbued with Bolshevism and that the communistic propaganda is very strong. … The new union will seek connections with similar organizations in other countries. (Kiehl 1919, 7)[13]

13 Kiehl also contributed occasionally to *Scientific American* during this time, especially on issues pertaining to Holland.

The concerned tone of the author and the fact that Steiner's name is linked to this same group in the National Archives suggests that pedagogical reform activities in socialist and esoteric movements share a commonality, namely, providing a site of resistance to the emergence of global capitalism.

Conclusion

Steiner's ideas about education have an under-explored connection to socialist and communist directions in pedagogy, a connection which is often overlooked. In order to better understand how resistance to global capitalism was expressed in the form of education, it is worthwhile for scholars to re-examine Steiner's thoughts on education in connection with his contemporary radical sociopolitical context: in other words, to interpret Steiner in terms of a social revolutionary. Both Schwab and Steiner agreed that adapting the education system to the demands of capitalism was unethical and damaging to the foundational purpose of intellectual (*geistige*) development. Steiner, however, went further, specifically including an esoteric philosophy as part of the curriculum, which, in his mind, served as a piece of the resistance to the encroaching capitalist commodification of German education and intellectual life. ■

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