

## P. Staudenmaier, The art of avoiding history

### Postscript on Waldorf Education:

In view of the many intensely aggravated anthroposophist responses to my research, and in consideration of Göran Fant's own position as a Waldorf teacher, it may be best to reiterate that I am not primarily a critic of Waldorf education as such, but a critical historian of the anthroposophical movement. My skepticism toward Waldorf stems largely from the unreflected negative elements within anthroposophy's past and present. Since I am, however, an active supporter of and sometime participant in the alternative education movement, a number of readers have asked for my perspective on Waldorf schooling today. While my focus is on anthroposophy and Waldorf during the first half of the previous century, and particularly during the Third Reich, rather than on current trends, and while I am not especially familiar with the internal workings of Waldorf schools today, I do share a range of misgivings regarding Waldorf pedagogy. My concerns may be summarized as follows:

Much of the original Waldorf movement in Germany before 1945 flatly rejected, and in some cases openly ridiculed, a variety of central alternative pedagogical principles, such as: small class sizes and concomitant ample individual attention; an emphasis on the unique and changing character of each pupil as an individual; encouragement of critical skills and independent thinking; an international orientation; a focus on the self-actualizing and self-directed unfolding of each child's individual potential; teaching that is child-centered rather than teacher-centered; democratic organization of curriculum, classroom practice, school structure, and so forth. The original Waldorf movement often defined itself against such alternative approaches to education, dismissing these approaches as un-German, spiritually unsound, and as decadent and damaging instances of "international reform pedagogy."

According to the original Waldorf model, children are incompletely incarnated beings whose process of incarnation must be overseen by anthroposophically trained teachers. Waldorf pedagogy as established by Steiner is explicitly teacher centered, not child-centered, and the teacher is to have an expressly authoritarian role within the classroom. Children's critical faculties are frowned upon and discouraged. Early Waldorf leaders also vehemently denounced individualism, calling it un-German and corrosive of authentic spirituality. The original Waldorf approach holds that every child is to be slotted into one of four temperaments, and that every child progresses through the same static stages of personal evolution based on Steiner's occult theories, and that these stages and temperaments are marked by physiological characteristics, just as the level of spiritual development of every soul is marked by the ostensible racial and ethnic characteristics of the body it occupies. These doctrines and practices are central to Waldorf as it was originally conceived and implemented.

Such assumptions are, in my view, at odds not only with significant components of alternative education, but with virtually any responsible pedagogical approach. Along with authoritarian and developmentally inappropriate teaching methods, Waldorf class sizes are also a serious concern; the normal class size at the original Waldorf school in Stuttgart during Steiner's lifetime was approximately 40 pupils, with some classes as high as 120 pupils, and in 1951 the average class size was over 50 pupils. These figures are not only sharply contrary to the basic orientation of the alternative education movement, they are significantly larger than in many other schools, public or private, both in North America and in Europe.

Waldorf's peculiar pedagogical preoccupations sometimes extend well beyond such mundane matters, however. Consider, for example, the classical Waldorf response to left-handed children. In his conferences with the original Waldorf faculty, Steiner emphasized that left-handedness is unacceptable in Waldorf classrooms. Readers skeptical of this claim need merely consult the published conferences themselves, readily available in book form as Rudolf Steiner, *Konferenzen mit den Lehrern der Freien Waldorfschule in Stuttgart*; the series is available in English under the title *Faculty Meetings with Rudolf Steiner*. In the conference of May 25, 1923, for instance, Steiner declared left-handedness to be a "karmic weakness" (Steiner, *Konferenzen mit den Lehrern der Freien Waldorfschule* vol. 3, p. 58; see also vol. 2, p. 92 – the conference of May 10, 1922 – on the anthroposophical view of left-handedness in conjunction with temperament). In the conference of December 18, 1923, a teacher reported to Steiner that a certain pupil in the 7th grade wrote better with her left hand than with her right hand, and Steiner responded that the pupil must be told she may only write with her right hand (Steiner, *Konferenzen mit den Lehrern der Freien Waldorfschule* vol. 3, pp. 109-110; interested readers may also consult Rudolf Steiner, *Die Erneuerung der pädagogisch-didaktischen Kunst durch Geisteswissenschaft*, pp. 199-200). This coercive practice is inimical to a free and holistic education, which Waldorf claims to represent. Some latter-day Waldorf practitioners nonetheless continue to defend the practice.

A number of Waldorf schools today, in Germany and elsewhere, have modified several of these questionable features, and there is undoubtedly a wide spectrum of current Waldorf practices, with some schools hewing to a relatively orthodox heritage while others choose more freely from the broad palette of Steiner's teachings. Some schools, at least, appear to have gone through a more or less deliberate process of deciding what to retain and what to discard from the array of traditional Waldorf precepts. Many of the features outlined above, however, are for better or worse a large part of what makes Waldorf distinctive among the various approaches to education represented today, alternative or otherwise. It seems to me that it would be sensible for those who wish to defend the positive aspects of Waldorf to take some notice of these problematic features, at the very least, and try to take these features into account when discussing Waldorf education as a whole.

Similar issues arise regarding a range of other characteristic Waldorf phenomena. While these particular questions may or may not apply at specific Waldorf schools, they remain typical components of the overall Waldorf approach. For example, a number of European Waldorf schools reject soccer and sex education on anthroposophical grounds, while some North American Waldorf schools reject black crayons. Many Waldorf teacher training programs are based on the notion of Waldorf teaching as a karmic mission. German Waldorf schools currently have an extraordinarily small percentage of 'foreign' and non-white students, in sharp contrast to public schools in Germany today. Such matters merit the attention of those who care about the viability, accessibility, and integrity of non-mainstream educational initiatives.

Perhaps the most serious concern raised by critics of Waldorf schooling today (many of them experienced Waldorf veterans) is that Waldorf schools are consistently evasive about the anthroposophical underpinnings of their pedagogy. Waldorf schools in general frequently downplay, deny, or obscure their anthroposophical origins, while providing prospective parents with uninformative and inaccurate depictions of anthroposophy. To an extent, this is an understandable reaction on the part of teachers, administrators, and admirers of a publicly visible institution that is based firmly on an esoteric worldview; the uneasy relationship

between occult initiation and public outreach continues to bedevil the anthroposophist movement, whether in Waldorf contexts or biodynamic contexts or otherwise. Such factors may contribute to the unusually high rates of attrition and turnover at many Waldorf schools. The spiritual and/or religious character of anthroposophical beliefs also presents difficult legal issues for some Waldorf schools that depend on or desire public funding. Nonetheless, in secular societies it is particularly important for esoteric movements, paradoxical as this may seem on first glance, to be as straightforward as possible in openly proclaiming their wider aims and views, and to make their basic tenets readily available for external scrutiny. This is especially the case when the education of children is at stake.

An additional serious concern regarding Waldorf schooling is the possible role of anthroposophical teachings on race and ethnicity within Waldorf classrooms. On this score, there is conflicting evidence from Waldorf schools in different countries, and many Waldorf teachers and advocates appear to be simply unaware of Steiner's racial teachings. This ignorance is at best a double-edged sword, and leaves the underlying problem unaddressed. Unfortunately, attempts at public discussion of this question frequently reveal an unsettling level of complacency toward racial thinking as such, and a lack of knowledge about what racism is and how it functions both historically and today, among enthusiasts and promoters of Waldorf education. The very issue of whether and to what extent the ongoing consequences of racial ideology continue to operate within Waldorf classrooms thus remains difficult to discuss, much less resolve.

Moreover, in many cases defenders of Waldorf – when they address the matter at all – insist that even if such instances occur, they do not indicate any sinister intentions on the part of Waldorf teachers or Waldorf thinkers. This response displays a distressingly naïve understanding of racism. Many forms of racist belief are not intentionally sinister, but are instead embedded in high-minded, benevolent, and compassionate orientations toward the world. It is this type of racist thought, whose historical heritage extends through the White Man's Burden and many forms of paternalistic racial ideology, that may find a welcome home in some Waldorf schools and other anthroposophical contexts, where it can perpetuate its ideas about race under the banner of spiritual growth and wisdom. This kind of racist thinking spreads more readily precisely because it is not tied to consciously sinister intentions. Seeing through this kind of racism – which, furthermore, often has more widespread and more insidious effects on the real lives of real people than the intentionally sinister variety does – means paying attention to the background beliefs that animate a project like Waldorf, whether among its founding generation or today.

It is, alas, by no means historically unusual to find would-be do-gooders turning into evil-doers, and in the process inspiring a substantial public following, by failing to examine the foundational concepts behind their particular project, harmless as it may initially appear. The history of the Waldorf movement before 1945 presents a microcosm of this complicated process. Waldorf began with sincerely good intentions, and within less than a decade and a half after its inception the Waldorf movement found itself entangled in Nazism, with some Waldorf leaders offering enthusiastic endorsements of various aspects of the Nazi program. Reflecting on this history can help us better understand how good intentions, when wrapped around an unacknowledged and unexamined core of racial and ethnic values, can get swept up into something their founders and promoters did not envision and did not want.

Without dwelling on the details, it is important to recall that prominent anthroposophists and Waldorf spokespeople openly condemned the Weimar republic and endorsed the Third Reich. The fragile democratic system of the Weimar era was established by the opponents of Nazism and represented everything that the Nazis loathed. Several key founders of Waldorf were decidedly hostile to Weimar democracy, and some of them viewed democracy itself as an un-German aberration inflicted on Germany by its enemies. During the interwar period, many Waldorf leaders distrusted democracy and sympathized with national and authoritarian alternatives. The noticeable trend among early Waldorf activists and anthroposophists to denigrate the fledgling democracy in Weimar Germany does not stand out as one of Waldorf's shining moments, and is particularly striking when viewed alongside the enthusiastic and publicly expressed support for the Nazi regime, over a remarkably long period, by significant elements within the Waldorf movement and the anthroposophical leadership.

For many Waldorf adherents, however, raising such issues even in a carefully contextualized and nuanced manner provokes extraordinary defensiveness; they evidently believe that historians who address such matters are simply fishing for scandal. This attitude is essentially the opposite of my own approach. In my view, neither historians nor anybody else should look to the past to find scandalous subjects in the first place. We ought to be looking instead for historically important themes that are relevant to the concerns of today. By that standard, the Waldorf movement's history during the Third Reich deserves a good deal more attention than it currently receives, not less, and a good deal more informed and careful and critical attention as well.

It seems to me that this should be clear even to readers who have little specific interest in Waldorf but have a basic sense of twentieth century history. The Waldorf movement and the Nazi movement were almost exactly contemporaneous; they arose at the same time in the same place and with significant cultural and ideological overlap, and occasionally personal overlap as well. The same is true of other aspects of anthroposophy, from the biodynamic movement to the Christian Community. The details of these conflicted interrelationships are complex and sometimes contradictory. Regrettably, this complexity is not reflected in public presentations by today's Waldorf representatives, and this does a conspicuous disservice to prospective Waldorf clients.

To readers who are supporters of Waldorf, or involved in Waldorf projects in some way, it may be important to say, explicitly and concisely, that the history of your movement under the Nazi regime is complicated and ambivalent, and is not in my view something that you or other Waldorf participants need to feel personally ashamed about. It is, however, something that you would do well to educate yourselves and your colleagues about. As matters stand currently, that will mean taking a skeptical view of the usual Waldorf claims about that historical period, and looking to non-Waldorf and non-anthroposophical sources for more thorough accounts of this part of Waldorf's past.

I would be pleased if my research provided an opportunity for Waldorf admirers to ponder this contentious history and take its lessons seriously. What is worrisome about the Waldorf movement's continued failure to address anthroposophy's racial legacy is not that Waldorf schools in the twenty-first century will start churning out little Hitler youths; what is worrisome is that Waldorf advocates and sympathizers may unknowingly help prepare the ideological groundwork for another unforeseen shift in the broader cultural terrain, in which

notions of racial and ethnic superiority and inferiority could once again take on a spiritual significance that lends itself all too easily to practical implementation in a changed social and political context. For this reason among others, I strongly encourage those involved in Waldorf endeavors to take another look at the history of their movement and the doctrines at its core.

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