

## **Where is the Waldorf School Movement Going?**

### **Rudolf Steiner's pedagogy between adaptation and progress**

by Johannes Kiersch

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The British historian Niall Ferguson (1999) reinterprets the outbreak and course of the First World War by considering not only what happened, but also what could have happened. He looks for the latent possibilities in certain situations. This way of working with "counterfactual scenarios" allows a new evaluation of events, and at the same time, it stimulates us clearly to imagine hidden possibilities which, in our present-day situation, could be taken up—or not. In light of this, it is interesting to ask ourselves what could have happened in Germany after the collapse of 1945 if the new government would not only have allowed the free development of the economy, but also of the cultural and spiritual life, including education. In retrospect, "free enterprise" and the "German economic miracle" seem sensible and fitting responses to a desolate situation. Where would we be today, however, if a similar thing had taken place in our schools and universities? We would now have confident and enterprising teachers who would work with the same energy as the many middle-class entrepreneurs who brought about the economic miracle. In cooperation with free parent organizations, these teachers would initiate and maintain a colorful and dynamic education miracle. We would be in the vanguard of progress.

### **The relic of the government-controlled school system**

Instead of this scenario, during the post-war years, practically nothing changed in the traditional structures of the school system, and nobody seemed to take special notice at the time. The centralized, hierarchical administration system of the Empire had stayed virtually intact during the Weimar Republic. It had survived the Nazi dictatorship and remained unaltered even after the collapse of 1945. Because society had to be totally rebuilt, all political forces were so consumed with this task that no strength was left to spend on initiatives in the realm of education. And weren't public schools a clear achievement, showing the progress of civilization? Wasn't it laudable that government had stepped in during the 19th-century in order to give all ranks of society access to a more sophisticated education; that it had done away with religious interference and had substantially improved the social status and training of teachers? Shouldn't government also be responsible for legislating and administering the democratization of public

consciousness, now, after the war?

Representatives of all political directions—conservatives as well as socialists and liberals—were completely unanimous on this point, even though they may have differed in many other respects. Textbooks of civics instruction written after 1945 did mention freedom and democracy, but in educational circles everything remained just the way it had been. In the separate states of the German Federation ever more complex and differentiated administrative structures were developed. The traditional hierarchy in the civil service solidified the time-honored distinctions between teachers of lower and higher ranks. Regulations regarding certification and promotion safeguarded the selection of the gifted, something which was felt to be unavoidable. In connection with this, the continuation of the old system brought about a deep-rooted feeling of entitlement. The widespread need for legal security led to a proliferation of regulations. Many people complain about this, but nobody has made a serious effort to do anything about it. For example, the Revised Collection of Official Regulations for the state of North Rhine-Westphalia has, in the meantime, grown more voluminous than the telephone book of a metropolis. Everyone who is affected by these ordinances knows, or at least senses, that they are, for the most part, superfluous, but everybody adjusts and plays along.

The legal framework in which the educational system operates is reminiscent of old-fashioned military structure or of a prison system. Educators are subjected to an artificial system of rituals—similar to what one used to find east of the Iron Curtain before it came down—a system of collective lies, thought to be inescapable. Vaclav Havel, the well-known Czech president, described this system of lies in detail when he was still a dissident. In his book about the Power of the Powerless he reveals how this web of lies functions in the day-to-day reality of a socialist state and develops into a system (Havel 1978). He describes how the charade in such a system gradually becomes uncontrollable, how it takes on an irrational life of its own in which all concerned are tied up, how it removes itself more and more from the reality of life, and how finally—as Havel predicts with breathtaking clarity in 1978—it will noiselessly grind to a halt without any violence or revolution.

### **Under world-view pressure**

If one wants to come to clarity about the present-day position of the Waldorf schools within society, one should look critically at the public school system in order to find out which stage the charade has reached in unfolding this “irrational life of its own.” Even though it was progressive at the time of its inception, the public school already has a long period of degeneration behind it. It has become far removed from the reality of life. At the same time, it is subject to growing burdens brought about by the changes in society,

which exacerbate the problems inherent in the system. We read every day in the newspapers how much the world in which our children are growing up has changed in the last decades. The disintegration of families, the negative influence of the media, the increasing bombardment of the senses, the lack of movement, the deterioration of speech, the time pressures on modern urban children, the social pressures of entitlement: All these factors increase stress on teachers of all schools to such a degree that it's hardly bearable anymore.

In addition to this, public schools are subject to something that one could designate as “world-view pressure.” The neutrality of education in public schools is a fable. Schools are subject to the hard pressure of materialistic positivism, a world-view that reigns as the underlying philosophy today, not only in physics but also in biology and in other areas of natural science. Materialistic positivism has, in fact, penetrated all areas of culture. This world-view, which is thus stamped upon schools, objectifies the world, makes it denser and more like a physical thing than it is by nature. Viewed anthroposophically, we are dealing with an extension of the perception model of the lower senses onto the middle or higher senses. We need not be surprised when children who learn to view the world in this way, namely from the perspective of physical perceptions, react to this insult with physical violence. The violent world-view of materialistic positivism brings forth social violence in schools. This, in turn, is promoted by the violence of school buildings in which form and color spring from the same world-view (Rittelmeyer, 1994). Apart from this, public school curricula generally disregard child- development. They tend to follow the system of specialized subjects. Teacher training in Germany is mainly organized by subject—in contrast, for example, to the way it is done in Switzerland. Limited by regulations governing tests and supervision, teachers hardly have a possibility to combine such a fragmented cosmos of educational goods into a meaningful whole—let alone to help their students to discover ways to construct a meaningful world-picture on their own. Modern schools have become ugly and senseless.

In the meantime, many educational activities that used to be cultivated in good schools as a matter of course, are shifting to the private sector. Music schools are experiencing growing enrollment. Art and sports are pushed out more and more. Schools can no longer take proper care of weaker children because of the existing stressful circumstances. As a result, the special-education industry flourishes, with business transactions in Germany growing into the billions. Paying for more sophisticated educational goods has become common practice, something which has been the case in Japan for a long time. This industry has come to expect little from the schools, and it is building up its own internal educational activities. On top of that, an inexhaustible supply of education outside the school is offered by the Internet.

## **Opening for a beautiful and meaningful school**

Why do most experts continue to stand up for public education, unfazed by all these clearly visible developments? One reason, of course, is that their positions and privileges depend on it: Material circumstances determine consciousness (Karl Marx). But above all they seem to underestimate the momentous change in consciousness, which began about ten years after the Second World War and which has become the basis of action and thinking for the younger generation that has begun to take on responsible positions in society. This change is described by sociologists as a shift in values, the transition from the values of duty and acceptance to those of personal development (Bohnsack, 1996). Nowadays, young people no longer expect any salvation for society to come from above, but it is commonly accepted that each individual bears responsibility for his or her success in life and is free to join others to realize that goal.

In view of all this, it is only a question of how long the sick system of government-controlled school administration will still hold out. Insightful experts among the educational authorities have already started to give teachers leeway to experiment with self-government, thereby anticipating the time “after.” Experts in the economic sector assist them in that, for example, in the network of innovative schools sponsored by the Bertelsman foundation. We need not concern ourselves overmuch with speculations as to the length of the death struggle of the system nor with the more-or-less dramatic emergency situations which still might occur. The Waldorf school movement has to ask itself a decisive question at this point. Those who stand for the pedagogy of Rudolf Steiner should make clear to themselves what they and their schools should expect after the silent collapse of the old system. Some of us presently try to escape this uncertainty about the future by trying out various adaptation maneuvers. Senseless textbooks are being introduced, sharing among colleagues in the salary structure is being abandoned (as is being done in several Waldorf schools in North Rhine-Westphalia), preparation for the final exam is pushed down into the 10th or 9th grade, even into the middle school; classes like eurythmy or music are being reduced to one period per week or are abandoned altogether; therapeutic assistants or special-education teachers are being let go, and so forth.

There are other ways. We can look beyond our own circles and find partners who strive for a future of freedom in education, as is being done through the activities of the EFFE, the European Forum of Freedom in Education. Other examples include the efforts of WERI, the Waldorf Education Research Institute in America, and the worldwide initiatives of the Friends of the Art of Education of Rudolf Steiner in Berlin. We can propagate certain findings of research in modern psychology and show how they confirm and support the aims and methods of Waldorf pedagogy. We can take note that the

strengthening of music education at the costs of theoretical subjects does not cause worse test results. In addition to the gains in music education, there is proof of its positive effect on the social behavior of students (Scheidegger/Eiholz 1997).

Above all, however, we can reflect on our anthroposophical insights into the nature of the human being. The fundamental teachings about the members of the human being have in the meantime been given a broad foundation and expansion by several publications. This, in turn, has furthered the developmental psychology of Waldorf pedagogy. These insights point to the importance of age-appropriate education, and we are beginning to represent these views more aggressively to the outside world with some success. An example of such an effort is the new Alliance for Childhood.

In addition there is the anthroposophical teaching of the twelve senses, which is still largely unknown territory. Its significance has been underestimated up till now, and there is a pressing need to make it more concrete. Last, but not least, there is the teaching of three-foldness, Rudolf Steiner's central teaching of the functioning of the three systems of body, soul, and spirit. The exciting but difficult challenges which our children pose to us today can only be solved if we start from the middle system. "The teacher's feelings are by far the most important means of education" (Rudolf Steiner). Apart from painting and modeling, speech and music in the schools need to be strengthened, and above all eurythmy. This art of movement integrates all realms of sense perception, harmonizing them and making their interaction positive. Taking the findings of modern chronobiology into account, we must work on the development of hygienic schedules and timetables. The Main Lesson of the Waldorf school must be understood as the central place where students can learn to build up a meaningful world-view which counterbalances the fragmented world of the special subjects. Building up a meaningful world-view needs a theoretical foundation of a Waldorf philosophy, to be worked on systematically by linking up with the many existing Goetheanistic research efforts. Rudolf Steiner had something like this in mind in 1917, shortly before the founding of the first Waldorf school, when he talked about the grand idea of a "Philosophy of the Human Being," a possible bridge between anthroposophy and the separate academic disciplines. (Riddles of the Soul, GA 21).

In this way our Waldorf schools can become beautiful and meaningful schools, instead of third-rate secondary schools or gymnasias. The outdated system of government control in schools will collapse in the foreseeable future. We can join with other forces in society and look ahead to prevent chaos when that happens. We can be pioneers of progress.

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