

# INTRODUCTION

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THE LECTURES IN THIS VOLUME provide a unique glimpse into Rudolf Steiner's years in Berlin around the turn of the twentieth century. They are divided into two sections: part one consists of lectures given at the Worker Education School, founded in 1891 by the socialist Wilhelm Liebknecht (1826–1900) as a school for working-class people; and part two consists of lectures given at the Independent College, founded in 1901 by Bruno Wille and Wilhelm Bölsche.\* The appendix contains documents related to Steiner's activity in the Giordano Bruno Association, also founded by Bruno Wille. This introduction will deal with Steiner's activity in the Worker Education School.

One might wonder how Rudolf Steiner, who was in many ways a critic of Marxist thought and was never a member of any political party, came to teach at an institution with direct ties to the German Social Democratic Party. It should be borne in mind that during Steiner's time there, the Worker Education School was not yet a training ground for political speakers and union leaders, though it later became this. Instead, it was a place where working people—who had generally ended their education around age fifteen or sixteen in order to work in factories—could further their studies in various subjects: economy, history, jurisprudence, natural science, and oration. Because of the long work days, courses were taught in the evenings from 9 to 11 p.m. With the rise of the workers' movement at the end of the nineteenth century, the school had received a fresh impulse, after struggling for some years. Many freethinkers of the day taught there, including

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\* Bruno Wille (1860–1928) was a liberal writer on religion, editor of *Der Freidenker*, and founder The Free People's Theater in Berlin. Wilhelm Bölsche (1861–1939) was a romantic lyricist, philosopher, critic, socialist, and novelist. He wrote a Faustian, monistic novel, *Revelations of the Juniper Tree*.

Wilhelm Bölsche. However, the post of history teacher had always proven difficult to fill. Students initially expressed interest in the subject, and many signed up for the history courses, but slowly numbers dwindled and teachers never lasted long.

In December of 1898, the school had to publish its programs for the following semester without having secured a history teacher. The school board approached a few candidates, but to no avail. Finally, the poet Cäsar Fleischlen told them to ask his friend Rudolf Steiner, a scholar who had worked on the Weimar edition of Goethe's works and who was currently the editor of the *Magazin für Literatur*. At the time, Steiner was, in the words of the dramaturge Walter Harlan, a "free-floating and unpaid scholar of God."<sup>\*</sup> He was an unorthodox candidate, but the school board was desperate and approached him anyway. As Johanna Mücke describes in her account of Steiner's time at the Worker Education School: "We came to Habsburgerstrasse 11, where a friendly young gentleman received us and said, when we had made our request: 'Well, if you want me to teach history *in my own way*, then yes, I can do it.'"<sup>†</sup> In his *Autobiography*, Rudolf Steiner gives an account of his motivation for accepting the post:

I made it clear to the directors that, if I took over the teaching, I would present history according to my own views of human evolution, not as interpreted by the Marxists, as was now customary in Social-Democratic circles. They nevertheless wanted me to give the courses. Having made this condition, it did not matter to me that the college was based on a Social-Democratic ideology by the elder Liebknecht. To me, it consisted of men and women of the proletariat; the fact that the majority of them were socialists was none of my business. The mental outlook of my students, however, was

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\* Quoted in Wolfgang G. Vögele, *Der andere Steiner* [The other Steiner] (Dornach, 2006), p. 85, and Peter Selg, *Rudolf Steiner, Life and Work, Volume 2 (1890–1900), Weimar and Berlin*, trans. Margot Saar (SteinerBooks, 2014), p. 192.

† Johanna Mücke and Alwin Alfred Rudolph, *Erinnerungen an Rudolf Steiner und seine Wirksamkeit an der Arbeiter-Bildungsschule in Berlin 1899–1904* [Recollections of Rudolf Steiner and his activity in the Worker Education School in Berlin 1899–1904] (Basel, CH: Zbinden Verlag, 1979), p. 14. [emphasis added]

my business. I had to find a completely different way of expressing myself than I had become used to until then. To make myself understood to some degree, I had to find my way into their forms of concepts and judgments. . . .‡

When Steiner began teaching at the Worker School, the classes (and classrooms) were small. Less than fifty students attended his first course, “Intellectual Currents in the History of Modern Times from the Reformation to the French Revolution.” Instead of presenting a Marxist interpretation of history, as was generally expected within the School, Steiner spoke about the spiritual movement initiated by Voltaire and Rousseau as a precursor of the French Revolution. Voltaire, with his free-spirited battle against any form of authority, and Rousseau, with his profound and persuasive writings on the free unfolding of the human personality, represented the spirit behind the Revolution. Interestingly, many years later, Steiner referred back to this spirit—which expressed itself more or less unconsciously in the motto “liberty, equality, fraternity”—when he sought to establish social threefolding after the First World War.

Steiner’s approach was at first a surprise for the students, who had been schooled in Marxist thought and tended to view all spiritual matters as “byproducts” of material, economic processes. For them, it was questionable whether the spiritual striving of individual human beings could really be a driving force in history. Steiner knew the soul disposition of his students and the “inexpressibly tragic situation” that the proletariat’s intense desire for knowledge had so far been “satisfied only through the grossest form of materialism.”§ But the materialistic ideas that had been absorbed by the workers from popular scientific literature and from Marxist writings contained “partial truths.” Steiner therefore developed his approach on this basis:

Had I merely ignored [the partial truths] and taught history from an idealistic perspective, the workers would have sensed that what I said did not agree with the partial truths they already knew. Consequently, I began with a fact that was comprehensible to my

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‡ Rudolf Steiner, *Autobiography* (CW 28), trans. Rita Stebbing (SteinerBooks, 2005), p. 193.

§ Ibid.

listeners. I showed why it makes no sense to say, as Karl Marx does, that economic forces dominated history prior to the sixteenth century. I also showed that economics did not assume a form as understood in Marxist terms until the sixteenth century and that this process climaxed in the nineteenth century. Thus I was able to speak quite factually about the spiritual ideals active in the preceding epochs of history, and I could show that more recently those impulses weakened in the face of material and economic forces. In this way the workers received ideas about knowledge capacities and the religious, artistic, and moral forces in history, and they ceased to regard them as merely ideological. It would have been useless to enter a controversy over materialism; I had to allow idealism to arise from materialism.\*

Though Steiner's views were at odds with those generally held by the workers, his presence and teaching style were inspiring and drew them directly into the content of the lessons. Whereas other teachers usually held classes in the form of lectures, after which the students went home tired and more or less content, Steiner encouraged questions and lively debate after his presentations, taking the time to answer all of his students' questions patiently and objectively. The classes soon went to midnight or later.

Steiner began with less than fifty students, but within a few months he had around two hundred. In addition to history, he taught oration. He had a warm interest in all of his students, in their challenges, hopes, and longings. When correcting their work, he pointed out encouragingly the areas that needed improvement and he never hesitated to praise what was praiseworthy. The accounts of former students attest to the festive mood of his classes, which lifted all the participants above their narrow concerns and filled them with joy in learning.

Johanna Mücke describes one particularly memorable experience from that time:

One conversation from the early years still stands vividly in my mind, which I overheard on a school excursion (because Herr Doctor also took part in it). Several young people walked alongside him

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\* Steiner, *Autobiography* (CW 28), pp. 193–94.

and talked about their lives. One of them exclaimed animatedly: “Why is there so little happiness in life when everyone wants to be happy?” Herr Doctor replied: “Yes, but perhaps life is not there in order to make us happy!” “Yes, but why else?” said the young man, quite shocked. “Well, suppose life were there in order for us *to accomplish a task*.”

These words were spoken very kindly but with such deep emphasis that we all went on in silence for a while, and they remained firmly in my memory, although I hardly understood them at the time.<sup>†</sup>

Despite Steiner’s deep connection with his students, and their enthusiastic appreciation for him, the leaders of the school began to question whether Steiner should be a teacher there at all. He had made it clear that he would only teach in his own way and not along party lines. This was problematic for some of the more dogmatic directors of the school, who felt that Steiner’s views went against the interests of the party. When Wilhelm Liebknecht (the founder of the school) was approached early on and asked his opinion as to whether Steiner should be permitted to continue teaching at the school, he responded: “They should be glad that they have such a good teacher. His political views need not concern them.”<sup>‡</sup> But when Liebknecht died in 1900, the dogmatism and intolerance of the school directors grew steadily over the years and Rudolf Steiner was increasingly felt to be an unwelcome guest, despite his popularity with the students.

This situation was compounded by the fact that Steiner became General Secretary of the German Section of the Theosophical Society in 1902. Regarding his attitude toward the Theosophical Society at that time and his reasons for taking on a leadership role within it, he wrote:

A large part of the membership fanatically followed individual leaders within the Theosophical Society. And they swore by the dogmas laid down by those very sectarian leaders. I was repelled by the triviality and dilettantism within the Theosophical Society. Only among the English theosophists did I find inner meaning that arose from

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<sup>†</sup> Mücke, *Erinnerungen*, p. 18.

<sup>‡</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Blavatsky, and this was still cultivated in the right way by Annie Besant and others. As for myself, I could never have worked as they did, but I found a spiritual center there with which it was possible to unite if one was serious about spreading spiritual knowledge in the deepest sense. Marie von Sivers and I counted less on the members of the Theosophical Society than on those in general who attended meetings with open hearts and minds when earnest spiritual knowledge was seriously cultivated.\*

Steiner's decision to work within the Theosophical Society shocked the leaders of the Worker Education School. How could a theosophist be allowed to teach in their school? Steiner, for his part, made sure to send the first issues of the journal *Luzifer*, of which he was the editor, to the school's library so that there was no confusion about his views.

In order to discredit him and sow doubt among the students, the school board arranged a debate between Steiner and the Marxist Max Grunwald. The hope was that Grunwald would show the students the error of Steiner's views. Unfortunately for them, the opposite occurred. As one eye-witness described of the debate:

It was a gigantic battle of spirits. Steiner was in rare form. He spoke dramatically, cowed his opponent with his wealth of knowledge, and spoke with such passion and fire that even his enemies were entranced. The little Grunwald, a struggling physician, had his work cut out for him. He was not stupid and people were usually in awe of his knowledge and ready wit. But he was already hopelessly lost in the first round.†

At the end, 12 of those present declared themselves in favor of Grunwald and 348 in favor of Steiner.

Steiner began to lecture throughout Europe and often had to postpone his classes at the Worker School to accommodate his touring schedule. This was seized upon as a justification for his dismissal from the school. The board claimed that Steiner no longer had any interest in the school, and because they could not oust him in the open,

\* Steiner, *Autobiography* (CW 28), pp. 112–13.

† Quoted in Peter Selg, *Rudolf Steiner Life and Work, Volume 2 (1890–1900)*, p. 214.

they did it behind closed doors at a board meeting which Steiner was unable to attend. Johanna Mücke, dismayed by the underhandedness of the board and out of a sense of responsibility, decided to inform Steiner of the decision. He was not at all surprised and had been expecting his dismissal for some time. Many years later, in a public lecture, he remarked:

And so I was thrown out—because I was not willing to teach the orthodox, dogmatic, and materialistic view of history—by those bigwigs; four people against six hundred of my students; four people who had never heard my lectures against six hundred students who had listened to me for years.‡

This was the tragic end of Steiner's time in the Worker Education School. The opposition he was later to face from many directions already showed itself in the duplicitous actions of the school board. Rudolf Steiner later wrote of the tragic fate of the worker movement:

I have the impression that if more unbiased individuals had taken an interest in the workers' movement in those days, and if the proletariat had encountered real understanding, that movement would have developed very differently.§

Shortly after leaving the school, Steiner wrote in a letter to Marie von Sivers: "You know that my work in these circles was a mission for me. Something has been destroyed that I did not wish to see destroyed."<sup>¶</sup>

What was it that Steiner felt as a "mission" with respect to his working-class students? Was it, perhaps, a mission of awakening, of awakening in human souls a consciousness of the true nature and dignity of the human being? In the context of the Worker Education School, he primarily cultivated an "education through history," often referring to Hegel's words: "World history is the progress of humanity in the consciousness of freedom." Freedom and dignity were the two moral ideals that shone most brightly in his classes in the school.

‡ Lecture in Stuttgart, May 3, 1919, in *Neugestaltung des Sozialen Organismus* (GA 330), 2nd ed. (Dornach, CH: Rudolf Steiner Verlag, 1983), p. 161. Not available in English.

§ Rudolf Steiner, *Autobiography* (CW 28), p. 195.

¶ Selg, *Rudolf Steiner, Life and Work, Volume 2 (1890–1900)*, p. 215.

In a lecture on Roman history, he placed these ideals clearly before his students:

We must see how this old Roman ruin is collapsing and how something came out of it under which the peoples had to groan for a long time. It begins with the call for freedom and ends with the suppression of freedom. It is the call declaring that everyone should respect each other as equals, and it ends with everyone being oppressed. It is strange that in our time historians have found themselves defending Caracalla because he gave so-called equality to the whole Roman Empire. As one of the most insignificant and harmful Caesars, he made those who were outside in the provinces equal to the Romans, but then he oppressed them all together! And this figure has been given the mantle of a champion of Roman freedom!

When we see that the destiny of freedom can be like this, then I think we really gain from history what we can call a kind of education through history. Then we learn that there is a real rock, like Peter had—a rock based on the original founder, on which human development can really be built. This rock is and must be human freedom and human dignity. These can be suppressed at times, indeed as strongly suppressed as in the old Roman Empire by conditions that can be compared with few others. However, the education of the human being to freedom is given in history. We must remember this important fact: when power and violence ruled in ancient Rome at its peak, the foundation was at the same time undermined, and the whole structure collapsed. However deeply suppressed, it must be said of freedom that the following true saying applies to it, indeed arises from it:

The old collapses, times change,  
And new life blossoms from the ruins.\*

As the catastrophe of the First World War loomed on the horizon, it was to this “new life” that Steiner appealed—the new life slumbering in the souls of human beings, waiting to be awakened.

Steiner’s activity in the school, like his later efforts for social three-folding, did not seem to change the political landscape of the time in a significant and lasting way. And yet, was it all in vain? Was the

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\* Lecture of July 19, 1904, on page 56 of this volume.



striving of the workers in the school in vain, given the unchanged social conditions?

Johanna Mücke asked Rudolf Steiner this question. His response was:

You must make a clear distinction: for the improvement of social, organizational conditions, it means next to nothing because completely different laws apply; but for the development of individual souls, like any real striving, it means a great deal.<sup>†</sup>

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<sup>†</sup> Mücke, *Erinnerungen*, p. 29.