



*Ita Wegman, 1928*  
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# *The Mystery of the Earth*

*Peter Selg*

In the March issue of the periodical *Le Monde diplomatique*, Sonia Shah—the American science journalist and author of *Pandemic: Tracking Contagions, from Cholera to Ebola and Beyond* (New York, 2015)<sup>1</sup>—wrote a noteworthy essay with the title *The microbes, the animals, and us*.<sup>2</sup> In it she emphasized that what should concern us is that “speculation about which wild creature originally harbored the virus obscures a more fundamental source of our growing vulnerability to pandemics: the accelerating pace of habitat loss.” In her contribution Shah reports on the new disease-causing pathogens that have emerged in greater numbers during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—from HIV to Ebola to the corona virus; and she describes the circumstances surrounding this. She portrays the destruction of the habitats of many species, and what animals do to evade it. These animals carry pathogens into proximity to human settlements. (“Consider Ebola. According to a 2017 study, Ebola outbreaks, which have been linked to several bat species, are more likely to occur in places in Central and West Africa that have experienced recent deforestation. Cutting down forests forces bats to roost in trees in

backyards and farms.”) According to Sonia Shah, a connection between the occurrence of epidemics and deforestation has also been established with regard to diseases transmitted by mosquitoes—as well as with tick born illnesses. She goes on to assert: “It’s not only habitat destruction that increases the risk of disease emergence; it’s also what we’re replacing wild habitat with. To sate our carnivorous appetites, we’ve razed an area the size of Africa to raise animals to eat.” Shah reports on illicit trade or the so-called wet markets—markets where live or recently slaughtered animals are traded, and on the physical proximity of animals that would never have encountered one another in the wild (“allowing microbes to jump species...”). “This process begot the coronavirus that caused the 2002–2003 SARS epidemic and possibly the novel coronavirus stalking us today.” Shah also shows that animals that are crowded together in cramped spaces before death in the slaughterhouse of industrial meat production systems generate the ideal conditions for the transformation of microbes into deadly pathogens. And she describes numerous other paths leading to epidemics and potential pandemics.

The connections she presents in the limited space of her essay are both shocking and impressive. Like so much else at the present time, they point to an overarching crisis facing civilization—and to the consequences of false, anti-ecological politics that more and more strike a blow against people; lacking a decisive change in course they lead to hardship and misery.

In the US, Donald Trump’s administration has liberated extractive industries and industrial development from environmental and other regulatory constraints, which will accelerate habitat destruction...reducing the ability

to pinpoint the next spillover microbe and contain it when it starts to spread.



It is occasionally asserted that bacteria or viruses have not been considered seriously enough by anthroposophical medicine. This however is just not true. In his time, Rudolf Steiner himself did not just comment critically about the out-of-hand “fear of bacilli” or the “obsession with hygiene” as “modern superstition,”<sup>3</sup> but also warned about the dangerous reality of “pathogens of the worst kind”<sup>4</sup> that could become the “destroyers of human life”<sup>5</sup> and bring with them “dreadful epidemics.”<sup>6</sup> He did not leave it at that—and today it is important to recall this. Time and again, indications are found throughout Steiner’s work about how important it is to strengthen the human being’s inner forces of resistance to bacteria and “bacilli” (among which Steiner colloquially subsumed viruses) through appropriate nourishment and a way of living<sup>7</sup> but also through an inner soul-spiritual demeanor.<sup>8</sup> Entering into sleep at night with “fear” and in a “materialistic mood” prepares “fertile ground” for the pathogenic efficacy of omnipresent germs<sup>9</sup>; the inner instability created by fear and “hate” or “fright” weakens human beings—individuals or whole communities—and enables the emergence of larger epidemics.<sup>10</sup>

In lectures, Rudolf Steiner outlined the relationship between the cultural habitus of “lies, defamation, hypocrisy” and the emergence of infectious diseases, mediated by an alteration in the world of elementary forces<sup>11</sup>—an indication that gives much to think about in the face of a longstanding, worldwide atmosphere of fake news and defamations of

all sorts.<sup>12</sup> According to Steiner “bacilli” could, in a certain sense, be seen as “physically embodied demons of lying”<sup>13</sup>—whereby it must be noted he meant not only a problem of individual human beings but also the destructive, ever more active “lies” of civilization (its reckless lifestyle of consumption accompanied by the extermination of whole realms of creation, and the perfidious system of the ruinous, inherently hypocritical “externalization society”).<sup>14</sup> On occasion, Rudolf Steiner actually spoke about “bacilli” as “ahrimanic beings”<sup>15</sup> and manifestations of anti-Michaelic forces.<sup>16</sup> On October 14, 1917, he once again described the battle of Michael with Ahriman in the suprasensory worlds during the course of the dramatic nineteenth century, the defeat of Ahriman, and his “being thrown to the earth.” In connection with this he said:

... Just such a battle took place there through which these Ahrimanic legions—after they were thrown down to the earth—brought into the realm of the earth all that population of the earth that we now refer to in medical terms as bacilli. Everything designated as bacillus forces—in which bacilli have a part—is also a consequence of the fact that Ahrimanic legions were once thrown down to the earth from heaven, that the dragon was conquered—just as it is a consequence of such a victory that the Ahrimanic-Mephistophelian way of thinking has taken hold since the end of the 1870s. As a result, it can be said: Tubercular and bacillus-related illnesses have a source in the material realm that is similar to what the intellectual materialism [and nationalistic and racist thinking] in our very midst has in soul-spiritual realms; in the higher sense, (these) things fully resemble one another.<sup>17</sup>

Substantive references of this kind are largely foreign to everyday consciousness—and, according to Steiner, for

centuries they have also been passed along only in hidden communities like the Rosicrucians. (“It is said in all the esoteric schools of Europe that all bacterial diseases of the modern time have a similar origin. The bacterial diseases are traced to their spiritual origin. This is an esoteric tradition among the Rosicrucians and in other occult schools where these things are taught.”<sup>18</sup>) Nevertheless if we understand the relationship that exists between the materialistic way of thinking—in regard to the way human beings view themselves and the world—and the civilizational lifestyle that results from the practice of such an attitude, Rudolf Steiner’s statements about the spiritual dynamic of this circumstance appear as anything but far-fetched and can be read as background commentary to Sonia Shah’s model. In a lecture held in Stockholm on 17 April 1912 and in an Esoteric Lesson in Cologne on 9 May 1912 (one day after his first indications about a planned sculpture of the “Representative of Humanity” created out of the forces of wonder, love, and conscience<sup>19</sup>) Rudolf Steiner even pointed to the connection that exists between the cruelty to animals that results from the mass consumption of meat and the emergence of “bacilli” and “bacilli-”generated illnesses.<sup>20</sup>



At the beginning of 1929, four short years after Rudolf Steiner’s death, Ita Wegman opened the first issue for the fourth year of her journal *Natura: Eine Zeitschrift zur Erweiterung der Heilkunst nach geisteswissenschaftlicher Menschenkunde* [*Natura: A journal for the expansion of the healing arts according to the spiritual scientific understanding of the human being*] with a lead article by her that bore the title *The Mystery of the Earth*.<sup>21</sup> According to Ita Wegman the focus of this issue for the new year was to draw attention

to a “new thinking”—and the urgent need to break “ground” for it in the near future. (“The evolution of humanity is at the same time the evolution of the earth. And the new thinking is already approaching human beings; it is only a matter of taking it up courageously and implementing it resolutely in all realms of life.”) In this issue of *Natura* Wegman published essays by Rudolf Hauschka (*Das Brot und die Erde* [Bread and the earth]); by Herbert Hahn (*Brot und Bewusstsein* [Bread and consciousness]); by Walter Johannes Stein *Vom Wandel der Erde* [On the earth’s changing]); and Lily Kolisko (*Über das Brot und das Quecksilber* [About bread and quicksilver]). And she herself wrote in a fundamental way about the connection of the human being and humanity to the earth.

The earth is the setting for human development. However, it became this setting only because at the deepest level the human being has a soul–spiritual origin. The physical body of the human being is only a sheathe for the soul–spiritual. The development of this sheathe is the history of the earthly human being and his earthly surroundings.

Wegman’s essay (included later in this volume) belongs without question among her most significant texts and should be studied in depth during this hundredth anniversary year of anthroposophical medicine—especially in regard to what she set forth about “Mercury,” the ancient “guider of souls,” and who today is “the bringer of knowledge and the giver of impulses for deeds.” In the last part of her presentation Ita Wegman explores the “Christ-permeated perception” of reincarnation and karma in the modern Michael Age. “Now it is not only a matter [in this cultural and consciousness soul epoch—PS] of repeated earth lives and the destiny of the human being, but also the connection of human beings

to one another and to the earth. The Christianization of this teaching is based on the fact that the destiny of the earth is recognized as being integrated into the destiny of the human being.” The humanity that is alive today must feel increasingly responsible for the destiny of the whole planet earth.

Through trade and modes of communication modern humanity has begun to encompass the whole of the earth. It [modern humanity] has essentially taken complete outward possession of the earth. As a result something that had never existed before now arises for more recent humanity: a relationship of destiny to the earth as a whole. That will have to be taken into account ever more consciously.

She goes on to say that antiquity imposed only a very limited responsibility on the human being and essentially entrusted guidance of the world to the gods; now, however, humanity bears responsibility for the existence and the future of the whole earth.

Natural process and the course of history that were at first distinctly separate begin to merge more and more. During older times, this was only occasionally the case. Venice, the splendid Renaissance city, stands in the sea on pylons made from forest timber that once covered the mountains of Dalmatia. The deforestation of these woods created an increasing change in the climate. What can be seen in this small example will come to pass in the future in larger examples.

If humanity fails to fulfill its responsibility it will encounter natural events in the near future “that it actually causes itself although it does not recognize itself to be the cause.” Phenomena would arise for which there would be no

explanations—nature, that heretofore appeared to be ordered by eternal laws, will appear to fall into confusion.

We, in fact, stand right at the entrance to this world situation. Nature is becoming a mirror of chaotic human behavior. This is revealed in catastrophes and abnormalities. The human being views them in the mirror of nature without recognizing his own reflection in them.

Ita Wegman wrote these sentences at the end of 1928 and published them at the beginning of 1929, more than ninety years ago—three Saturn rhythms. In the meantime, humanity no longer stands merely at the “entrance” to the epoch she outlined but is already in the midst of it, as can be read in the events of the most recent past and current events in the present. “This is revealed in catastrophes and abnormalities...” in the phenomena of climate change and all its consequences, in the rapid extinction of species, in the destruction of the basis for earthly life and in epidemics, in the inner and outer “climate” of humanity in a globalized world. “Nature is becoming a mirror of chaotic human behavior.”

In *Le monde diplomatique* Sonia Shah portrays aspects of this “chaotic behavior” and its consequences. What is becoming clear in any case is this: Relationships and responsibilities will increasingly be seen and understood—in the realm of climate or “anthropogenic” epidemics, even if not yet in the context of their full spiritual background. But the implications must be quickly recognized before it is too late for the earth and humanity on the earth. In the words of Ita Wegman,

The signs of the times all around us speak to us in a clear language. Nature, as it changes, asks us earnestly whether we want to change our thinking, whether we want to recognize that from out of confusion and suffering what

appears to us as a demand of the cosmos is not annihilation but the spiritualization of the human being.

In this, Anthroposophy and its spiritual understanding of the human being and the world are of urgent significance, current, and more necessary than ever for the salvation and healing of the earth.<sup>22</sup> It is a matter of taking practical steps on a large scale but also locally—as well as undertaking essential “deeds of the ‘I’” in the midst of a difficult and decidedly complex crisis.