

History Three-folded

by Paul Gierlach

A long-time Waldorf history teacher invites his colleagues and interested others to a conversation about the impact of how history is taught...

There was a time when the Waldorf science curriculum had to prove itself in the mainstream. About thirty years ago or so most questions that came to a school faculty concerned the viability of “Waldorf science.” Those times have passed, and Waldorf grads matriculate at universities around the world with realizable intentions of having a career in any of the sciences. The same was and is true in the field of mathematics. As far as I know no one in his right mind has ever questioned the fact that Waldorf students have a close affinity to any of the arts. That includes literature in all its manifestations. But what about history?

History has not proved itself. Nor is it a “given” that Waldorf students are immersed in the histories. We might be inclined to think that such an oversight is no big deal, but actually, it is. In fact, I would go so far as to suggest that it undermines the purpose of Waldorf education. Waldorf education is a response to Rudolf Steiner’s inability to inculcate into the mainstream of post-World War I society the realization that society is an organism with three interpenetrating members distinct in character and purpose. The thought was, of course, that were we as citizens to really understand social forms and impulses in their three-fold character,—were we to note, consider, and eventually understand relationships between society and the nature of human beings,—then and only then we would create a society that was suitable for human habitation and ongoing human evolution. The three-fold society organism did not play a role in the “peace talks” at Versailles, and there has been war ever since. Waldorf education is meant to foster all things three-fold.

The high school history curriculum provides a framework for an elaboration of the three-fold nature of society, but do we teachers actually create in the children an awareness of the forces that create cultural identities, legal responsibilities, economic relationships? Rudolf Steiner

did not make up the existence of these forces; actually, all historians deal with them. Even journalists do. We are allowed to mention them without crossing that line where



we would “teach anthroposophy.” Have we forgotten that for the past hundred years or so historians have moved away from the Old History approach to understanding our past (those appreciations of history from the point of

view of important leaders, national strife, etc.) and have embraced New History (that which concerns itself more with social realities that are common, such as feminism and even post-modernism)?

In point of fact, it is *modern* to look for a way to explain us and our ancestors to ourselves and call it *history*. The

hidden strength of our pedagogical approach is the biography, true. Yet, we need more than that these days since we find ourselves compelled to be more and more explicit in every area of our teaching.

The fact that we Waldorf teachers as historians are asked to appreciate history from the point of view that includes an existence between one death and a rebirth into a subse-

quent life, and from the point of view of active spiritual presences in evolving earthly activity, does put us outside the mainstream. But it is much too early to worry oneself about such things. We are not out to teach three-folding; rather, we are going to foster an ability to uncover the complexities of social intercourse of all kinds in all individuals and races and nations and times with “three-fold questioning.” It is enough for us as high school teachers to open students’ eyes and instincts to the presence of these forces. Perhaps our students can do little with the concepts at first, but the impulses can certainly live in them as more than the “limited view” mentioned in the next quotation. In Rudolf Steiner’s *Soul Economy* we find the following:

If school subjects are introduced in the wrong order, students project their own experiences and understanding of purely physical laws into the social sphere and into their understanding of history. And since this way of seeing the world has deeply penetrated educational practice, the general public is quite willing to look for natural laws in practically every area of life, *so that one may no longer suggest that historical impulses originate in*

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the spiritual world. Again, this is reflected in the current principles of education. Children are encouraged to develop a firm belief in what they have been taught in physics and chemistry, so that later on, as adults, they will maintain this limited view in their outlook as a whole. (page 19, my italics).

There is no call to teach the three-fold social order; all we need to do is help the future citizens of all the nations on earth touched by anthroposophy to find it. Our teaching will be a continuum of discovery, for the acknowledged facts of history will lose their status as *truths* and prove more valuable as *exempla*. True, we should know conceptually something about the three-fold social organism before looking for it, but we can best learn about its intricacies and mysteries by finding its activity in historical events and conundrums.

Let me just mention a few examples of what I mean before wondering out loud if there is anyone reading this article who feels the same way about this pressing responsibility and wants to do something to further an anthroposophical reading of history and consequently an understanding of humanity.

I know of no Waldorf school that does not teach a “Revolutions block” in grade 9. We teachers move a lot of blocks around, but not that one. Before I even write the words, many of you are saying “*liberté, égalité, fraternité.*” Rudolf Steiner stated that this impulse was premature, that the society was not ready for it, and it led to bloodshed. It takes some effort by us teachers to cite all that was premature so that we create a fair picture of the specific times; it is a bit more work to speak of the French Revolution as a template for the many revolutions that have followed it; yet this we do so we can have one dependable viewpoint of modern times. When we have a four-year overview of the three-fold social organism, we can find the Imaginations needed to treat the three nouns *liberté, égalité, fraternité* as living forces. Unless a school offers the block in which students create their own societies within the framework of these forces (*Idealism and Humanity*), the Revolutions block is the best place to introduce the three-fold social organism as theme, as fact, as aspiration.

Students meet a curriculum that leads them from Sentient Soul times (2097-747BCE, grade 10) through the Intellectual Soul epoch (747BCE-1413AD, grade 11) to our modern Consciousness Soul times (post-1413AD, grade

12). By using the previous sentence we can not only intuit but prove in a phenomenological way that the spirit that must express itself in a three-fold manner in our materialistic, present times manifested itself differently in times past.¹ To uncover that spirit—it would be to discover the motherlode of historical verity!

The “Ancient Civilization” block is very handy for our purposes. As any history book will show, all cultural, political and economic activities were united in one ruler. Howsoever often he, and sometimes she, was changed, the spiritual idea remained fast bound to the times: the gods spoke through someone, and everybody else listened. In one’s own tribe or village or city, that is. Of course, other languages spoke out directives from different gods with the same conviction, and warfare was inevitable—as was innovation and migration and change. In this block,

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we teachers can advance the notion of three-foldness itself by framing our understanding and appreciation of it within 1) the *physical elements* of geography, climate, altitude, etc., that gave a form to the different civilizations; 2) the *soul characteristics* of customs, languages, religious beliefs, political forms, economic activities that linked different civilizations together; and 3) *spiritual impulses* evident in what Karl Jaspers called the Axial Age. It was that time (roughly 600-300BCE) when thinkers and other influential men—they were all men from what I can tell—incarnated in a wide swath of the ancient world from China to Greece to jolt certain cultures into new di-

rections, especially as regards personal spirituality (in opposition to ritual) and thinking (in opposition to acceptable explanation). All this we can find in the recognized fact: *culture was everything.* (We can in the same block nudge the students to an awareness that that change is an important historical event and so point out to them a substantive fact that bears much pondering.)

The moment we think the thought: *ancient civilizations were all cultural*, we might be tempted to think: the civilizations that follow in the next age are all political. But such is not the case. However, it is easily discovered that what characterizes the Intellectual Soul age is the gradual change of a predominantly cultural sphere into one that wants also to be recognizably human: the political. Now we have in history a chance to explore two

¹ Rudolf Steiner said as much in his Christmas Day laying of the Foundation Stone of the Anthroposophical Society in a reference to the Greeks.

spheres: cultural and political, with economics following the lead of the most powerful. Let's remind ourselves that the Romans not only borrowed their gods from the Greeks but then proceeded to rename them and make contracts with them! This very conflict of what actually exists (the gods in their splendor, especially in Sentient Soul times) and what the mind creates (the ideas of gods who are suspiciously unable to speak any longer) is the conflict between Nominalism, the thought that reality is a construct of human thinking,² and Realism, the conviction that there is a spiritual component to our thinking and our life, even if we are unable to access it directly.

Is the endless conflict between civil and secular order (read power) not a defining element in the Medieval block? I prefer to trace the transition from the Sentient Soul one-ruler type (which we find in Charlemagne) through the discord between nations and between commoners and royals that characterize Intellectual Soul activity (which is clearly evident in the brilliant, powerful, and dysfunctional family of Henry II and Catherine of Aquitaine) to the beginning of the modern state with its penchant for organization (in the reign and realm of Louis XI) which prefigures the Consciousness Soul activity of modern times. But there are many ways to discover and present the forces of culture, politics, and economics in their shaping of the facts as we know them.³ (A hidden benefit of this approach is that we can make evident what is often overlooked in our work: people thought differently in earlier times.)

Economics is the force of the Consciousness Soul age. Rudolf Steiner commented on this new fact as World War I ended and the new world order became evident. We find it ourselves in our own lives. We live it every day. It is hardly possible to read an article on any subject these days in journals and newspapers that does not somehow reference the economic sphere.⁴

Economics is a block in grade 12 that can lead students to appreciate the essential fraternal aspect of this

impulse, especially when the teacher approaches it as a science. What contrasts can be drawn! Another block, Symptomatology, is by its nature designed to lead the student beyond the facts that are evident to the spiritual impulses that are present but veiled. It is a block that can summarize four years of work in the high school and be that moment when three-folding is unfolded in its verity. Yet, this block cannot stand on its own, for the students can only appreciate its import and impact if they have been led for three previous years to see the cultural, political, and economic forces that have always been part of our social existence.

I have talked enough for now. (And yet have only touched the surface of the enquiry.) Let me simply add that as history teachers we are tasked with the creation of society in the future. This is no longer the time to think

of history as dealing with the past. It deals with the future. For the Consciousness Soul age is of the future. Is it not true that the spirit speaks to us all, in many ways? It is our job, I would say, to help students learn to listen to it as it sounds out its daily toll.

Facts of history are, indeed, events; yet the phenomenon is not the impulse. As high school teachers we need to open up the unseen world for our charges; we need to embrace the unseen and perhaps the immediately unknowable. For me, *serendipity* is the new *intellectuality*. I have come to believe that what is *serendipitous* for us is actually a *common sense* of the spirits who inform our world.

And I wonder if others feel the same way I do? And would be interested in doing something about it? Whatever that *if* might be.

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2 These days we say construction of the human mind, not human thinking, which shows how far we have come along the great Materialism Trail.

3 Rudolf Steiner directs our attention to the transition from the Intellectual to the Consciousness Soul activity of human beings in *Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts*, specifically but not exclusively in the First, Second and Third Studies of Michael's role in human evolution.

4 In *The Corporation*, Joel Bakan offers a compact overview of the rise of the corporation and society's ensuing demise.