

The Secrets of Koberwitz: The Diffusion of Rudolf Steiner's Agriculture Course and the Founding of Biodynamic Agriculture

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Abstract

Rudolf Steiner presented his Agriculture Course to a group of 111, farmers and others, at Koberwitz (Kobierzyce, Poland) in 1924. Steiner spoke of an agriculture to 'heal the earth' and he laid the philosophical and practical underpinnings for such a differentiated agriculture. Biodynamic agriculture is now practiced internationally as a specialist form of organic agriculture. The path from proposal to experimentation, to formalization, to implementation and promulgation played out over a decade and a half following the Course and in the absence of its progenitor. Archival material pertaining to the dissemination of the early printed editions of 'The Agriculture Course' reveals that within six years of the Course there was a team of more than 400 individuals of the Agricultural Experimental Circle (AEC), each signed a confidentiality agreement, and located throughout continental Europe, and also in Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, and USA. Membership expanded to over 1000 AEC members (with a lower bound estimate of 1144 members) who were committed to working collectively towards an evidence based, new and alternative agriculture, 'for all farmers', which was to be developed into a 'suitable for publication' form. That publication milestone was realized in 1938 with the release of Ehrenfried Pfeiffer's 'Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening' which was published simultaneously in at least five languages: Dutch, English, French, German and Italian.

Keywords: *Organic Farming, Anthroposophy, Goetheanum, Agricultural Experimental Circle (AEC), Count Carl Keyserlingk, Kobierzyce, Poland, Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening, Ehrenfried Pfeiffer.*

Introduction

By the time Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) was cajoled into presenting the Agriculture Course, the Austrian mystic and philosopher was well experienced in planting an 'impulse', the seeds of an idea, and witnessing the ensuing manifestation. Emil Molt, for example, had approached Steiner about the education of children. This approach led to the founding in Stuttgart, Germany, in 1919, of the first Waldorf School. Molt took responsibility for the management and financing of the project and he purchased a large restaurant on the city escarpment with views out over the city of Stuttgart to house this new visionary school (Murphy, 1991). Steiner laid the philosophical underpinnings and set the pedagogic guidelines, and he personally trained the teachers, and then, with this demonstration school established, he campaigned tirelessly to promulgate this project. Despite not speaking English, Steiner took the Waldorf 'mission' to Britain, introducing the concept initially and briefly to an Anglo audience at Stratford on Avon in 1922, and then more

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extensively, at a two weeks conference for educators, The Oxford Conference on Spiritual Values in Education and Social Life, in the summer of 1922 (Paull, 2011b). He then presented a Waldorf education summer school at Ilkley in Yorkshire (Steiner, 1928, 1954) and further training for teachers at Penmaenmawr, Wales, in 1923, and at Torquay, Devon, in 1924 (Villeneuve, 2004). These exertions culminated in the founding of the first Anglo Waldorf school in 1925.

Steiner's Agriculture Course comprised just eight lectures presented over a ten day period in the summer of 1924, 7 to 16 June, at the small village of Koberwitz, Silesia (now Kobierzyce, Poland) (Steiner, 1924e). In contrast to Steiner's education project, where there was a tangible proof-of-concept, together with some years of intense personal advocacy and evangelism by Steiner himself, the future of the fledgling agriculture project was entirely dependent on the vitality imparted at the Agriculture Course. This was because Steiner withdrew from public life entirely just months after the Koberwitz course; as of 28 September 1924 he was no longer seen in public, and, after a period of illness, he died on 30 March 1925 (Collison, 1925; Whitehead, 2010). So the future of the Agriculture Course, if it were to have a future, relied to the greatest extent on the fecundity of the ideas presented and the developmental infrastructure that had been put in place at the time of the Course.

Count Carl Keyserlingk was an estate manager of 7,500 hectares (18,500 acres) at Koberwitz, and he was an anthroposophist (Steiner, 1924b). He managed 18 farms, comprising 82 officials, and more than 1000 field workers (von Keyserlingk, 1999). Keyserlingk was keen for Steiner to present a course for farmers. There was some disquiet amongst farmers in the rapid change in agricultural practices in the wake of the supply of cheap synthetic nitrogenous fertilizer flowing from the adoption of the Haber-Bosch process for the 'fixing' of gaseous nitrogen which was first demonstrated in 1909 and which was then rapidly industrialized on a grand scale for explosives, and after WWI, for fertilizer (Smil, 2001). Frustrated at the delay in Steiner taking up his invitation to set a date to run a course, Keyserlingk sent his nephew to the Goetheanum, the headquarters of Steiner's Anthroposophy movement, in Dornach, Switzerland, with instructions not to come back until a date had been agreed.

Ehrenfried Pfeiffer's account relates that: "Count Keyserlingk set to work in dead earnest to persuade Dr. Steiner to give an agricultural course. As Dr. Steiner was already overwhelmed with work, tours and lectures, he put off his decision from week to week. The undaunted Count then despatched his nephew to Dornach, with orders to camp on Dr. Steiner's doorstep and refuse to leave without a definite commitment for the course. This was finally given." (1958, pp.119-120).

Keyserlingk was the driving force behind the agriculture course. He was described by Vreede as "one to whom farming itself was a priestly office" (Vreede, 1929, p.38). According to Meyer (1929, p.29), "Count Keyserlingk had realised the dire need for a complete revival of cultural methods".

Steiner described his Agriculture Course as: "A course of lectures containing what there is to be said about agriculture from an anthroposophical point of view" (Steiner, 1924e, p.9). The programme to take the ideas forward was set in place at Koberwitz with the appointment of 'brand champions' (Carl Keyserlingk & Ernst Stegemann), the recruitment of a distributed network of developers (the Agricultural Experimental Circle), the appointment of a central clearing house (the Natural Science Section, Goetheanum, Dornach, Switzerland), a confidentiality agreement set in place for participants in the development stage (Table 3), and a planned public release after testing and development. As it turned out, this was a recipe for success.

Steiner stated that "the contents of these lectures were to serve, in the first place, as working material for the Association of farmers which had just been founded in the Anthroposophical Society" (1924d, p.17). Steiner explained that what he spoke of were hints towards a new agriculture and that the Course contents should, for the time being, be kept confidential: "the lectures should be primarily considered as hints, which for the present should not be spoken of outside this circle, but looked upon as the foundation for experiments and thus gradually brought into a form suitable for publication" (1924e, p.10).

Steiner expressed some clear ideas as to how to progress the course content. He stressed the importance of practical demonstrations: “As to the farmers - well, if they hear of these things from a fellow-farmer, they will say, “What a pity he has suddenly gone crazy!” ... But eventually when he sees a really good result, he will not feel a very easy conscience in rejecting it outright” (Steiner, 1929, lecture VIII, p.19). He empowered the Agricultural Experimental Circle (AEC): “enhance it and develop it by actual experiments and tests. The farmers’ society - the “Experimental Circle” that has been formed - will fix the point of time when in its judgment the tests and experiments are far enough advanced to allow these things to be published” (Steiner, 1929, lecture VIII, p.19). He stressed the importance of confidentiality: “No kind of communication was to be made about the contents of the Course until such time as the members of the Association felt impelled to speak out of the results of their own experimental work” (Steiner, 1924d, p.17).

It was critical that a project development plan was set in place at Koberwitz for two reasons, firstly, because the Agriculture Course was never repeated (unlike Waldorf education sessions which were repeatedly championed through summer schools and lecture series at diverse locations, in contrast Steiner did not return to the topic of agriculture) and, secondly, although up to this point Steiner had engaged apparently indefatigably in a comprehensive schedule of travelling and lecturing, he was seriously unwell, and his public life and life itself were drawing to a close. The continuing vitality of Steiner’s agricultural ‘impulse’ was dependent on Steiner successfully passing the baton to others.

The AEC began with 60 members of the Koberwitz Course (out of the course’s total enrolment of 111), with Ernst Stegemann and Carl Keyserlingk appointed by Steiner as chairmen (Steiner, 1924a). Steiner’s injunction had been to develop the Course into a form suitable for publication, and finally, in 1938, Ehrenfried Pfeiffer of the Natural Science Section of the Goetheanum at Dornach, published *Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening* which appeared simultaneously in at least five languages: Dutch, English, French, German, and Italian (1938a, 1938b, 1938c, 1938d, 1938e).

Biodynamic agriculture is now practiced in 47 countries (Demeter, 2011) and, while it is nested within the broader organic agriculture movement, it has been at the forefront of organic farming developments, including, for example, the participation in founding the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) (Paull, 2010), and taking one of the earliest stances against synthetic nanomaterials by excluding them from Demeter’s biodynamic food and agriculture standards (Paull, 2011a).

By 1929, the Natural Science Section of the Goetheanum reported the positive news that the work of translating Steiner’s ‘hints’ was by then a global enterprise: “Dr. Steiner’s new methods for Agriculture have been investigated and applied on a practical and on an experimental basis. The Experimental Circle now has its stations in most countries of Europe, as well as in Asia, Australia, New Zealand, America and Africa. Agricultural Conferences have been arranged in Dornach and elsewhere” (Steffen, Steiner, Wegman, Vreede & Wachsmuth, 1929, p.19).

The present study examines the early diffusion of Steiner’s Agriculture Course. The claim by Steffen et al. those five years on from the Koberwitz course the AEC was a global phenomenon is rather surprising given that all of the attendees at the Koberwitz course were from continental Europe. The present study examines evidence from the AEC non-disclosure agreements, and examines this claim of the early diffusion and internationalization of the work of the anthroposophical agricultural enterprise.

Methods

The early copies of *The Agriculture Course* were issued by the Goetheanum, copies were inscribed with the name of the recipient and numbered, and each recipient signed a confidentiality agreement. The present author had access to the archival material held in the Goetheanum, *Dokumentation am Goetheanum Bibliothek Kunstsammlung Archiv*, at Dornach, Switzerland, and the present account relies on manuscript material held in that archive.

Results

The first published edition of the Agriculture Course was in German, bound in green boards, and is undated. It is generally attributed as a 1925 publication, as, for example, in the catalogue of the Goetheanum library and in recent German language editions. The present research establishes that the first copies were issued in 1924, beginning from 19 November (for copies numbered #9, 10, 11 and 12, which are the earliest AEC agreements that were located).

For the German first edition of *Landwirtschaftlicher Kursus*, the copy #432, issued on 24 Dec 1930 (Christmas eve), is recorded on the final AEC agreement sighted, and is plausibly the final issue of this edition given that the second edition bears the imprint date '1929'. Of the 432 copies presumed issued, most of the AEC agreements have survived, however 91 numbers in the sequence (#1 to #432) are unaccounted for, while approximately 50 are accounted for more than once and it is not always clear from the AEC agreements whether access was extended to a further individual or the book was relinquished and reissued. The AEC agreements present a 'Who's Who' of early influential anthroposophists and advocates of biodynamics including: #10 to Elizabeth Vreede; #12 to Ehrenfried Pfeiffer; #17 to Lilly Kolisko; #18 to Eugene Kolisko; #205 to Hans Heinz; and #293 to Otto Eckstein.

Of the 432 copies, the overwhelming majority were destined for continental Europe addresses, including Denmark, France, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, and Switzerland. At least nine went to Anglo addresses, including Britain (N=6: #193 to Maurice Wood; #206 to Dr Loushka²; #232 to Eleanor Merry; #315 to Margaret Cross; #327 to Mr H Y & Mabel Heywood-Smith; #354 to George Kaufmann), USA (N=2: #196 to Ralph Courtney; #285 to Gladys Barnett) and Canada (N=1: #287 to Michael Schuster). None of the 432 German first editions were recorded to addresses in Australia, New Zealand, Africa, or Asia.

The first English translation of the Agriculture Course bears the date '1929'; however, the earliest issue date was 1928. Only 11 AEC agreements were sighted for the English edition, the first being #1E issued on 9 August 1928 and the final numbered #17E issued on 15 October 1930 (Table 1). Beyond copy #17E, no records were sighted. The 11 English AEC agreements reveal that copies went to New Zealand (N=4), Australia (N=2), England (N=2), South Africa (N=2), and USA (N=1) (Table 1). There is a single copy of the first English-language edition held in the Goetheanum library and it is numbered 'E26'; however, that inscription has been crossed out and replaced by 'E46' (the 'E' appears as a prefix). A further copy is held in the library of the Bio-Dynamic Agriculture Association (BDAA) at Stroud, UK, numbered '118' (and lacking 'E' as either a prefix or suffix).

² Legibility unclear.

Table 1: Recipients of the first English edition of 'The Agriculture Course' (*legibility unclear).

Issue #	Recipient	Destination	Date	Via Kaufmann
01E	Wood, E Maurice	UK	09/08/1928	Yes
02E				
03E	Sophia*, Vera V	South Africa	04/10/1928	Yes
04E				
05E				
06E				
07E	Scott, Mrs Lucy Johnstone Scott	South Africa	09/08/1929	No
08E				
09E	Stolting, Elise	USA	07/04/1929	No
10E	Jones, Clarence Harper	NZ	28/09/1930	Yes
11E	Pease, Marna	UK	26/04/1929	No
12E	Crompton-Smith, Bernard	NZ	15/02/1930	Yes
13E				
14E	McDowell, C	Australia	23/07/1929	No
15E	Wakefield, George Bolland	New Zealand	24/07/1930	Yes
16E	Coe, James	NZ	27/07/1930	No
17E	Genoni, Emilio	Australia	15/10/1930	Yes

The first English translation was issued to Maurice Wood. His Huby Farm in Yorkshire, according to Griffiths (2010, p.31), was "Britain's first biodynamic farm in 1928" and Kaufmann translated the Agriculture Course at his farm. The translation is by George Kaufmann and, although he had not attended the Koberwitz course, he was a gifted linguist well experienced in rendering Steiner's lectures into English, including the lectures by Steiner at the Oxford Conference of 1922 (Paull, 2011b). During WWII Kaufmann adopted his mother's maiden name and was thereafter known as 'George Adams', so post WWII editions of his translation state the translator as 'George Adams'. Although he was born in Mariampol (now in Lithuania), Adams' parents had moved there from Australia and later moved to Britain (Whicher, 1977). Some of the recipients of *The Agriculture Course* acknowledged receiving their copy *via* Kaufmann (Table 1; Table 2). Griffiths appears to be mistaken in putting the date of the English version of the Agriculture Course as 1930 which is odd since the publication is itself dated '1929', and the present research reveals that the earliest copies were, in fact, issued in 1928 (Table 1).

Table 2: Acknowledgment for ‘The Agriculture Course’ #1E.

AEC Acknowledgment to the Natural Science Section, Goetheanum
<p>1E</p> <p>To the Natural Science Section at the Goetheanum Dornach near Basle, Switzerland:</p> <p>I hereby acknowledge receipt, from Mr George Kaufmann (Anthroposophical Society in Great Britain, 46 Gloucester Place, London W.1.) of Copy No. 1E of the English Translation of Dr. Rudolf Steiner’s Agriculture Course (Koberwitz, June 1924)*.</p> <p>I accept it on loan for my own personal use, on the identical conditions which I have already undertaken to observe with regard to Copy No. 193 of the German edition of the Course, and which I hereby affirm.</p> <p>In the event of my death I hereby lay upon my relatives, executors and heirs the strict injunction to respect these undertakings and to return the aforesaid copy No. 1E of the English Translation of the Agriculture Course immediately and free of charge to the Natural Science Section at the Goetheanum, Dornach near Basle, Switzerland</p> <p>Signature <i>E Maurice Wood</i> <i>Sleights Farm</i> <i>Huby Nr Leeds Aug 9 1928</i> *Lectures 1-8 in typewritten form, bound in four quarto volumes Signature <i>E Maurice Wood</i> <i>Sleights Farm</i> <i>Huby Nr Leeds June 6th 1928</i></p>

The statement made by Steffen et al. (1929) that the Agricultural Experimental Circle was active in Australia, New Zealand, America and Africa is confirmed by the present study (Table 1). For each of the 11 AEC agreements the typewritten *pro forma* paperwork bears the handwritten inserted data: (a) copy number; (b) name and address of the recipient; and (c) by whom and where the agricultural experiments were to be conducted (Table 3). No evidence was located to substantiate the further claim by Steffen et al. (1929) that the AEC was active in Asia.

The record of the issuance of the first English translation of *The Agriculture Course* is spotty, and even in the short run 1E to 17E there are six copies unaccounted for (Table 1). The present study accounted for a total of 13 copies (11 by the AEC agreements and two by the actual copies). The copy in the BDAA library suggests, if we take it that numbering was continuous and consecutive, that there were at least 118 copies issued of the first English language edition of *The Agriculture Course*. A conclusion that there were at least 118 English copies remains somewhat speculative.

The first English edition of *The Agriculture Course* was a translation of the second German edition of *Landwirtschaftlicher Kursus* (red cover). The issue of the second German edition continued the practice of numbering the copy and inscribing the recipient’s name on the title page. AEC agreements for the second German edition were not sighted for the present study and the number issued is not known. Copy #1026 of *Landwirtschaftlicher Kursus* issued to a Netherlands recipient (author’s collection) places an arguable lower bound on AEC members at 1026. If the English copy #118 of *The Agriculture Course* is taken as an arguable lower bound for Anglo AEC members, then taken together with the Germanic AEC members, then a plausible total lower bound on the combined AEC membership is 1144 (1026 + 118). This total may be taken as provisional until further and later numbered issues of the *Landwirtschaftlicher Kursus* and *The Agriculture Course* and/or other records appear.

Table 3: *Agricultural Experimental Circle (AEC) pro forma non-disclosure agreement.*

Agricultural Experimental Circle (AEC) Non-disclosure Agreement
<p>To the Natural Science Section at the Goetheanum Dornach near Basle, Switzerland:</p> <p>I, ... <i>Edward Maurice Wood</i>...</p> <p>Hereby acknowledge the receipt of copy No. 193 of the Reprint of the Agricultural Course (sic), given by Dr. Rudolf Steiner 7th - 16th June, at Koberwitz near Breslau.</p> <p>I accept it on loan for my own personal use in carrying out experiments undertaken by ... <i>me</i>... within the Agricultural Experimental Circle of the Anthroposophical Society, at the experimental station at ... <i>Huby near Leeds</i>...</p> <p>Moreover I hereby undertake to preserve the strictest secrecy in all quarters as to the content of the aforesaid Lecture-course. I will conduct the experiments in such a way as to exclude all possibility of imitation; and I undertake to lay the same obligations of silence on any of my fellow workers. Moreover I undertake to burn after use any extracts or notes which I may make from the aforesaid Lecture-Course.</p> <p>I recognise that only the executive of the Goetheanum at Dornach near Bale (sic), or somebody especially empowered by them for the purpose, can relieve me of these undertakings.</p> <p>In the event of my leaving the Agricultural Experimental Circle or the Anthroposophical Society itself, I undertake to return the aforesaid reprint immediately and free of charge.</p> <p>In the event of my death I hereby lay upon my relatives, executors and heirs the strict injunction to respect the above undertakings and to return the aforesaid copy No. 193 of the Reprint of the Agricultural sic Course immediately and free of charge to the Natural Science Section at the Goetheanum, Dornach near Basle, Switzerland</p> <p>Signature <i>E Maurice Wood</i> <i>Sleights Farm</i> <i>Huby Nr Leeds June 6th 1928</i></p>

Caution needs to be exercised in summing these figures to arrive at tally of AEC participants because of: (a) omissions: it cannot be confirmed that all numbers in a sequence were in fact ever issued (although it is a plausible surmise) (b) duplications: some numbers were issued in several names, sometimes simultaneously (e.g. #327) and some numbers were reissued once or several times (e.g. #116 and #168), and (3) duplicated recipients: at least one person received copies in both German and English (Maurice Wood received #193 of the German edition and #1E of the English edition; Table 2).

Conclusions and Discussion

How to measure success? Steiner is quoted as stating that: “The most important thing is to make the benefits of our agricultural preparations available to the largest possible areas over the entire earth, so that the earth may be healed and the nutritive quality of its produce improved in every respect. That should be our first objective.” (in Pfeiffer, 1958, p.120). Such a bold vision is yet to manifest, nevertheless, Steiner’s Agricultural Course can be deemed a success which, as the present study demonstrates, was transformed into an international enterprise within six years and it remains as such. Steiner’s revelations have survived, evolved, proliferated, and their influence persists.

Steiner was prescient in much of what he taught. He presented the farm as “a living organism” (1924c, p.158). He spoke against a purely chemical view and a chemical reductionist view, and he insisted on the criticality of provenance, long before the doctrine of ‘substantial equivalence’ was recruited in the defense of GM food (Paull, 2008). Long before the costs of nitrogen pollution were monetized (e.g. in Sutton et al., 2011), Steiner, with great prescience, put it in a nutshell: “There is a big difference between nitrogen and nitrogen” (1924c, p.10). He spoke of “the degradation of the products of agriculture” and observed that: “Nowadays people simply think that a certain amount of nitrogen is needed for plant growth, and they imagine it makes no difference how it’s prepared or where it comes from. Where it comes from, however, is not a matter of indifference” (Steiner, 1924c, pp.9-10).

Steiner urged the adoption of a holistic view, and he stated that “we’ve lost the knowledge of what it takes to continue to care for the natural world” (1924c, p.10). He urged his listeners to take “the macrocosmic approach” (1924c, p.141) and to “see individual plants as parts of a single whole” (1924c, p.58). He was critical of the approach where living things are “neatly pigeonholed into separate species and genera”, adding: “But that is not how things are in nature. In nature, and actually throughout the universe, everything is in mutual interaction with everything else” (1924c, p.138).

Many decades before the articulation of consumer demand for free range eggs, and the rise of NGOs such as the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), Steiner stated unequivocally: “do not keep animals confined in dark stalls ... let them out to pasture and give them opportunities to interact with their surroundings ... If it never has the opportunity to be outdoors, this animal will be very different from an animal that can roam freely and use its senses” (Steiner, 1924c, p.156).

In a lifetime in which he presented more than 5000 lectures, Steiner delivered just a single course of eight lectures on Agriculture that were conveyed in German in 1924 to a group of farmers and others in an obscure village in present-day Poland. It is tempting to consider as so much puffery, the claim made in 1929 of Steffen et al. that farmers on many continents and as far away as Australia and New Zealand were by then joined in a common endeavour to test and progress the ideas presented in that course.

The present study confirms that within six years of the Course there were in excess of 400 participants in the AEC and they were located throughout continental Europe, as well as in Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, and USA. No evidence was uncovered to support the claim of AEC activity in Asia. AEC participants pursued their common cause with no budget and little or no prospect of personal financial reward. From ‘hints’, to tests, to experiments conducted by a globally distributed development team, to analysis, to evidence based prescriptions, to open publication, Steiner’s Agriculture Course was evolved into a clearly defined, bounded and differentiated agriculture now known as biodynamic agriculture.

The record of that transition is incomplete and further data can be anticipated to come to light, in particular further AEC documentation including numbered copies of *The Agriculture Course* and *Landwirtschaftlicher Kursus*, additional AEC agreements, and perhaps the AEC data of

Ehrenfried Pfeiffer and the Natural Science Section, which were not located by the present author. Further research, including examining the biographies of recipients of copies of *The Agriculture Course* and *Landwirtschaftlicher Kursus*, can be anticipated to throw light on the composition and output of the AEC, and extend the estimates of the size and geographic distribution of the AEC, beyond the data and estimates presented in the present study.

Since Pfeiffer's *Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening* first appeared in 1938 there have been many further books published on the practicalities of biodynamic agriculture including, for example, those by Koepf (1989) and Sattler & Wistinghausen (1992). Although the original recipients of *The Agriculture Course* were bound to secrecy, any injunction for non-disclosure has long since lapsed and the 'secrets' of Koberwitz are now readily available, with at least two English translations currently in print; moreover, the full text is freely available on the internet (<http://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/Agri1958>).

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