The Fundamental Social Law
Cosmas and Damian

Freely you have received, freely give.
Take neither gold, nor silver, nor copper in your purses,
nor a bag for your journey ... (Mt. 10: 8-10)
The
Fundamental Social Law

Rudolf Steiner on the Work of the
Individual and the Spirit of Community

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# Contents

## Introduction

### 1. Rudolf Steiner, Berlin, and the Beginning of the Twentieth Century

### 2. The Formulation of the Fundamental Social Law

### 3. The Threefold Social Organism (1919)

### 4. The Individual and the Community

## Notes

## Literature Cited

## About the Cover Image

## About the Ita Wegman Institute
Most of all, however, our times are suffering from the lack of any basic social understanding of how work can be incorporated into the social organism correctly, so that everything we do is truly performed for the sake of our fellow human beings. We can acquire this understanding only by learning to really insert our “I” into the human community. New social forms will not be provided by nature but can emerge only from the human “I” through real, person-to-person understanding—that is, when the needs of others become a matter of direct experience for us.

Rudolf Steiner, June 9, 1922 (83, 245)
Introduction

This is what is needed: we must rise to the occasion and summon the inner courage to think radically in certain matters, as our times demand of any alert individual.

— Rudolf Steiner, (333, 27)

We must hope for ever-increasing understanding of these matters.

— Rudolf Steiner, (340, 40)

This study expands and elaborates on a lecture entitled “Spiritual Science and Social Issues: Rudolf Steiner and the Fundamental Social Law,” which I gave on April 29, 2006, at the general meeting of the Freien Gemeinschaftsbank [Independent Community Bank] in Basel, Switzerland.

That lecture described the main features, background, and purpose of the “fundamental social law,” which Rudolf Steiner formulated for the first time around the turn of the year 1905/06. Steiner’s seemingly simple “social axiom” (185a) or “basic principle of social science and societal activity” (186) posits separating the performance of human work from material compensation: “It is essential to avoid associating the concept of work in any way...with the concept of income” (332a). More than a century has elapsed since Steiner’s idea first appeared in a small theosophical journal, but the perspectives he formulated there and developed in various ways in his later work seem to have lost little of their relevance. The replacement of human labor by technology has made unemployment a global problem and has provoked an existential crisis of meaning among individuals.
deprived of tasks in life. This situation, along with the worldwide proliferation of power, egotism, violence, and destructivity, is now prompting us to rethink many of our economic and social ideas, especially the mainstream understanding of work, competition, and remuneration.2 “Most of all, however, our times are suffering from the lack of any basic social understanding of how work can be incorporated into the social body correctly” (183). Ever since Adam Smith, most thinking about the market economy has been based on the premise that maximally enhanced self-interest is the most efficient motivator of economic production, universal prosperity, and social welfare; furthermore, egotistical desire for profit is the only possible basis for the human urge to work. (In Smith’s words, “We appeal not to your human kindness but to your self-interest.”) Developments that have ensued since Smith’s time, however, clearly call for revision of some largely unquestioned paradigms—along with acknowledgment of the actual situation, which Rudolf Steiner described in these words as early as 1908: “Nonetheless, it is true that all of today’s admirable inner and outer technical and scientific accomplishments have remained unmatched by our societal activity and social structures” (56).

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Rudolf Steiner did not formulate utopian ideals or postulate moral dogmas; his sober analysis of the contemporary situation was more anthropological in character. He argued emphatically that “solutions” to “social issues”—already the subject of much discussion in the early years of the twentieth century—would not emerge from economic theorizing but would have to involve reflection on the nature of the human being, human work, society, and the social body. If we misunderstand Rudolf Steiner and the quality of the anthroposophical spiritual science he founded, we may easily dismiss such reflection as either outdated or long since accomplished on the academic level, but in
In the first two decades of the twentieth century, Rudolf Steiner was already describing the “error” of believing that “salvation can come only from the economy” (330.) In the decades since then, the phenomenon he described as an evolution dominated (if not wholly determined) by technological and economic perspectives has produced an ever more one-sided situation, along with crises that have increasingly left their stamp on international political constellations and on our civilization as a whole. Right up to the present day, wars have been declared and waged on the basis of economic and political interests. The legal forms and instruments of nations have been misused, nature’s kingdoms have been abused and extirpated, and public affairs—and education—have been subjected to the dictates of technology and economics, and, de facto, aligned with them. “In modern times, as if hypnotized by economic activity and age-old habitual thinking” (328, 35), many proposals for
“reform”—whether with regard to labor market policy or social therapy—follow well-trodden, inherently conventional paths that allow the problems to become ingrained, increasing not only cultural stagnation and destruction but also resignation on the part of individuals.

“The question of the meaning of human labor underlies everything,” said Rudolf Steiner at the beginning of the twentieth century (328, 190). His “fundamental social law”—and in fact, all of his thoughts on the terms and conditions of economic and public activity—were totally new, unaccustomed, challenging, and ahead of their time. Although in many of his presentations on the “fundamental social law” and the “threefold social organism,” Steiner made the case for them purely in terms of political economy, those familiar with all of his work cannot fail to notice how far-reaching and fundamental the perspectives he represented actually were (and still are).

Steiner’s explanations of “the fundamental social law” clearly come at a crossroad in the cultural development of civilization. They suggest a practical route to new forms of society and community that leave the pathological spirals of egotism and destructive materialism behind and give expression to a higher humanity—and even to an effective “Christ Impulse,” as Steiner calls it. As such, they stand under the sign of a future culture of selflessness that is by no means ascetic or moralistic in character but is based instead on enhanced human forces of individuality and social conscience and therefore allows for the evolution of individual consciousness. This future culture—based on truly independent spiritual activity that supports the appropriate upbringing, schooling, and advancement of individuals—will have to produce specific changes in the structures of our public and working lives (now corrupt for the most part). Meanwhile, it must also be prepared to resonate behind the scenes of current discussions about a basic guaranteed income. This future culture is already making its first appearances in many places.
In spite of many depressing experiences (even in anthroposophical settings) and the relatively minimal reception his social impulses encountered during his lifetime, Rudolf Steiner never allowed his intentions to falter. He said:

If we are to contribute at all to human salvation, we must not be pessimistic; we must believe in our work. We must have the courage to believe we are really capable of bringing about what we think is right. To me, it sounds self-destructive to say, “We have ideas that could be put into practice, but I don’t believe that’s possible.” The question is not whether our ideas correspond to reality but simply how to implement them. Instead of thinking about the state of people’s heads today, we should think about what they must become. (330, 54)

On balance, even eighty years after Steiner’s death (and in spite of all protestations to the contrary), anthroposophical efforts to model the implementation of the fundamental social law and social threefoldness are only modestly encouraging. (“If we had just a hundred institutions today that had truly incorporated the anthroposophical social impulse on the structural level, the world would look quite different.”7) Many promising beginnings are counterbalanced by failed attempts, and even where encouraging early breakthroughs occurred, later developments reversed them and led to a partial loss of what had already been achieved (as in the Camphill Movement). Clearly, such situations are due in part to inadequate understanding or over/under/misinterpretation of what Steiner meant.8 In addition, it has become obvious that in all such attempts, the level of consciousness of those involved is crucial, as is their connection (voluntarily achieved) to the “spirit of the totality,” whose real presence Rudolf Steiner linked to the success of any alternative to egotism as the incentive for work:
Individuals who work for another person must see their reason and motivation for work in that person. Similarly, anyone who works for the totality must be able to sense the value, the essence, and the importance of that totality, which is possible only if the totality is something very different from a more or less indeterminate sum of individuals. It must be filled with a real spirit in which each individual can participate. Each one must be able to acknowledge the rightness of the whole and want it to be as it is. The totality must have a spiritual mission, and each individual must want to contribute to fulfilling that mission. […] Right into the details, the spirit of the totality must be alive. (34, 24f.).

A number of different anthroposophical institutions have experienced that when anthroposophy (formerly a vital and integral element of their “totality” and “spiritual mission”) became diluted, they also began to fail as social models. It seems that whenever the “spirit of the totality,” the spirituality and ideal intention of common effort, was no longer strongly and concretely present in the individuals involved but had been replaced by nothing more than a vague, indecisive, noncommittally stated and publicly proclaimed “openness” to “anthroposophy” (or “spirituality”), it was no longer possible to find one’s “reason for work” in the other and in the community. Rudolf Steiner calls this “the non-Christian principle of opportunism” (175, 250).

Regrettable as this development may seem, it remains a consequence of spiritual realities, and if received and understood positively, it results in a clear need to take up spiritual-scientific work and spiritual training anew and to tackle specific tasks for the future without making concessions to the supposed spirit of the times. At the same time, however, we must not lose sight of the fact that even in the twenty-first century, we are still not dealing with ultimate or ideal solutions but with ever-changing attempts to “steer … existence in a social direction.” As Steiner puts it,
The “social question” that is now emerging in human life cannot be solved by a few individuals or by parliaments. That cannot and will not happen. It is a component of modern civilization as such, and now that it has appeared, it will persist. It will need to be solved anew in every moment in the world’s history and evolution. Human life has recently entered a stage that repeatedly allows the antisocial element to emerge from social arrangements and establishments, and this antisocial element will always have to be tackled anew. Just as an organism always grows hungry again after a period of satiety, so too the social body repeatedly enters a disordered state after a period of well-ordered affairs. Just as there is no nourishment that satiates permanently, there is also no universal remedy that can ensure lasting order in social conditions. Nonetheless, human beings can establish communities in which the living interactions of individuals can repeatedly steer their existence in a social direction. (23, 14f.)

Consider the global state of civilization at the beginning of the twenty-first century: Advanced and inherently powerful technology dominates human consciousness through mediagen-gered needs. The compulsion to consume is maximized, self-interest prevails, and human soul forces have definitely weakened.9 We have reason to question whether this situation could actually still permit the social developments Rudolf Steiner spoke about in the first two decades of the twentieth century. In the face of fateful economic, cultural, and social developments, Steiner spent his last, almost desperate years of work on a breakthrough that was then still barely possible (and ultimately failed). If nothing else, the signature of this work speaks a very different language.10 We can be certain that the task of “steering” existence in a social direction” and “developing truly social thinking” (23, 192) remains as important as ever, on both the large scale and the small. Also still applicable are Rudolf
Steiner’s previously cited words, prototypically Christian in substance:

We must have the courage to believe we are really capable of bringing about what we think is right. To me, it sounds self-destructive to say, “We have ideas that could be put into practice, but I don’t believe that’s possible [any more].”¹¹

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Peter Selg  
Director of the Ita Wegman Institute for Basic Research into Anthroposophy  
Arlesheim, November 2006
I will serve the [workers’ education] school until they no longer want me....

— **Rudolf Steiner, October 2, 1903 (39, 432)**

For several reasons, [the spiritual scientific movement] cannot show itself now in the face it will wear someday. One reason is that in order to first gain a foothold, it must address a particular group of people. [...] To the extent that suitable circumstances ensue, spiritual science will also find forms of expression that allow it to speak to other circles.

— **Rudolf Steiner, 1905 (34, 220)**
As we work our way through spiritual scientific ideas, we enhance our capacity for social action. In this sense, it is important not only *which* thoughts we take in through spiritual science, but *what we do with our thinking as a result*.

— Rudolf Steiner, 1905 (34, 196)

*When the first part of his fundamental essay, “The Social Question and Theosophy,” appeared in the magazine *Lucifer-Gnosis*, which he edited, Rudolf Steiner was forty-five years old. For more than three years, the philosopher, Goethe researcher, and cultural critic from Vienna had headed the work of the German Section of the Theosophical Society. In this context, his research remained relatively obscure and little known to the general public. In the Theosophical Society, Rudolf Steiner accompanied and encouraged many pupils on their paths of esoteric development. His work as a spiritual teacher consisted in presenting content and concrete exercises in concentration and mediation. In a letter accepting this position in the summer of 1902, Rudolf Steiner had written, “I will build on the strength that enables me to introduce ‘students of spirit’ to the path of development. That must be the sole significance of my inauguration” (260a, 89).

From the very beginning and in spite of these spiritual and esoteric intentions, Rudolf Steiner’s work on behalf of theosophical spiritual science—like his previous publishing and cultural activities in Vienna, Weimar, and Berlin—also had a*
public aspect. Already shortly after accepting the position of general secretary of the German section of the Theosophical Society, Steiner began giving public lectures in the Berlin House of Architects, a building where large public events were held. In 1905, for example, in addition to nine lectures on Schiller at the Free University in Berlin, he gave four academically oriented lectures in the House of Architects that were intended to show the connection between theosophical spiritual science and the four classical faculties of theology, jurisprudence, medicine, and philosophy. For Steiner—in contrast to the prevailing introverted bourgeois tendencies within the Theosophical Society—the social relevance of the spiritual teachings he represented was essential, as he had already made clear in 1903 (the first year of the publication of the journal *Lucifer-Gnosis*) in his essay “Theosophy and Socialism,” in which he had attempted to demonstrate the extent to which theosophy would have to contribute to shaping social conditions in the future. In fact, he wrote, it must become the “soul of all things social” (344, 439). He continued:

> There may well be some theosophists who want to remain remote from the world and constantly repeat the statement that it is the destiny (karma) of modern peoples to face the test of their purely material outlook. To this we must respond that while disease is certainly a sick person’s destiny, those called upon to be healers are neglecting their duty if they avoid all attempts to heal because they see illness as a test. (34, 440)

* Rudolf Steiner began publishing his essay “The Social Question and Theosophy” at the end of 1905, a year of international political crises and tests, especially due to changes in Russia. At the same time as major strikes by miners in the West
German Ruhr area, the Russian strikers’ movement achieved revolutionary dynamics with “Bloody Sunday” in St. Petersburg, leading to the initial creation of socialist forms of organization. In the autumn of 1905, Russian workers proclaimed a general strike; on October 26, the first soviet was formed. That same day, in an urgent lecture on “Theosophy and the Social Question” in the Berlin House of Architects, Rudolf Steiner gave his first oral presentation of the basic premises of the essay that would appear in print two months later.¹²

In January of 1905, Rudolf Steiner had been forced—against his will and under considerable pressure from the school’s socialist leadership—to give up his long-standing and highly successful teaching activity at the Berlin Workers’ School. To Marie von Sivers, his colleague and future spouse, Steiner wrote, “You know that I saw a mission in my activity in these circles. Here something has really been destroyed that I did not want to see destroyed” (262, 88). Steiner had joined the school’s faculty five and a half years earlier, in the autumn of 1899, at the request of the school’s administration and on the recommendation of socialist Kurt Eisner.¹³ The school had been founded by Wilhelm Liebknecht in the early 1890s. Liebknecht, who belonged to the generation of Steiner’s parents, was a member of the German Reichstag [parliament] and editor-in-chief of the Social Democratic newspaper Vorwärts [Onward!]. Shortly after beginning his activity in the German empire’s capital, Liebknecht had given his famous lecture “Knowledge is Power,” placing emphatic priority on a proletarian educational policy for the proletariat under circumstances that continued to uphold knowledge as an exclusive privilege of the bourgeoisie:

In parliament, Count Kanitz had said that it was enough for the lower classes to learn to read and write a little and do just enough arithmetic to count their daily wages. On a schoolhouse wall on a large property in the city of Berlin was inscribed in letters of gold, “Loving Christ is better
that was the basic principle of primary education in the empire’s capital. Book learning was just adequate for acquiring a handyman’s skills.\textsuperscript{14}

The classes of the Workers’ School were held in a small room in a pub in the southeastern part of the city from nine to eleven at night, after the end of the students’ long work day. Their studies emphasized political economy but also included history, law, and natural history, and they were expected to practice oral and written communication. Their readiness to participate in this demanding course of study was quite remarkable.\textsuperscript{15} In the words of Rudolf Steiner as a contemporary witness:

You should have seen for yourselves how for decades the proletariat assembled in the evenings, in hours wrested from heavy work, to be instructed in modern economics, on the importance of work, capital, and the consumption and production of goods. You should have seen the tremendous desire for education that most of these proletarian individuals developed, pursuing knowledge at a time when, on the other side of the great divide, the higher classes were going to the theater or devoting themselves to other diversions, casting at most an occasional glance from on high at the misery of the proletariat. (333, 18)

Rudolf Steiner, himself of lower class origins, never denied his family’s background. In a different connection, he said:

Actually, I come from proletarian circles myself, and I can still remember looking out the window as a child and seeing the first Austrian Social Democrats passing by in their big hats, on their way to their first Austrian assembly in the nearby woods. Most of them were miners. From then on, I was actually able to witness everything that played out in the Socialist movement [...] as it appeared to someone
destined to think not only about the proletariat, but with the proletariat, while at the same time preserving an independent view of life and all its various facets. Perhaps that was my testimony in 1892, when I wrote my Philosophy of Spiritual Activity, which truly advocated for the social structures I now see as necessary for developing human talents. (330, 43)

The Marxist Rosa Luxemburg had categorically refused to be part of the faculty of the Berlin Workers’ School. “Although naturally drawn to teaching, she turned down this opportunity because of her extremely one-sided position within the Socialist movement, in the effort to avoid any allegation of recruiting willing followers from among the unspoiled and uncritical youth. For the same reason, she refused to give even a single lecture.” Unlike Rosa Luxemburg, Rudolf Steiner was in some ways diametrically opposed to the school’s socialist orientation, yet in the autumn of 1899 he spontaneously agreed to teach history there:

I had little interest in the school’s socialist connections. [...] I told its board of directors that if I were to teach there, I would lecture on history according to my own ideas on the course of humanity’s evolution, not in the Marxist style now customary in Social Democratic circles. They continued to want my services. For me, the school consisted of men and women from the proletariat; the fact that most of them were Social Democrats was of no concern to me. (28, 375)

Karl Liebknecht, who was no longer active in the School’s administration due to advanced age (in fact, he was close to death), had nothing against Steiner’s appointment and teaching activity: “You should be glad to have such a good teacher; his political views are none of your business.”17 Having been
guaranteed the freedom to teach as he chose, Steiner began giving lessons toward the end of 1899 with a lecture course on “Spiritual Streams in History: From the Reformation to the French Revolution.” His lecture courses were soon extraordinarily well-attended, ultimately drawing more than two hundred listeners. He went on to cover the French Revolution and nineteenth-century industrialism, and later added evening sessions devoted to the history of literature, culture, and philosophy, which he presented with great dedication. On Sunday evenings, he read selections by various poets and talked about their biographies. One member of the audience recalls:

He [Rudolf Steiner] also always pointed out the social and political tensions that broke through in this poetry. For him, what spoke out of these verses was the spirit of revolution, the heated intentions of outrage against the narrow-minded attitudes and incurable shortsightedness of the bourgeoisie, and the acknowledgment—born of spiritual vision—of the need (and here again he quoted Marx) to change the world. He was the one who always taught us that it is up to us to shape our lives according to our insights.18

After Rudolf Steiner’s lectures, there were always long discussions that lasted until after midnight. Increasingly, they also touched on issues involving individual problems and philosophies of life:

“Why is there so little happiness in life, when everyone just wants to be happy?” Dr. Steiner replied, “Well, maybe being happy is not our reason for being alive!”

“But what else could life be for?” the young man asked, shocked. “Well, just assume for a moment that we are alive so we can accomplish some particular task.”19
Rudolf Steiner at the Workers’ School. Berlin, 1900
Steiner’s words resonated so well with his working-class audience that he became one of the most sought-after speakers at union events in Berlin. He spoke to printers, metalworkers, and streetcar workers, among others, and was unquestionably the most important faculty member of the school founded by Liebknecht.

Although materially in need himself, Rudolf Steiner categorically refused increased remuneration for his lectures at the school. He often attended the school’s board meetings as a faculty representative, and a participant in one such meeting recalls a conversation with Steiner about payment:

As Dr. Rudolf Steiner’s lecture courses on literature and history became increasingly popular, the school’s board of directors discussed the possibility of paying faculty members on a sliding scale based on the number of students in their courses. When the plan was presented to Steiner after several such discussions, he was emphatically opposed to this arrangement, suggesting instead that if funds allowed, remuneration should be increased equally for all. The decision was then made to give all the teachers a raise, although in fact the student fees for Steiner’s lecture evenings covered the additional expense.  

For himself, therefore—and to the complete surprise of the school administration—Steiner had distanced himself from direct payment for his work.

When he first started teaching, Rudolf Steiner showed intense involvement and interest in the questions of his proletarian students, their life situations, and their desire for knowledge. In later presentations, he emphasized that in the course of industrialization—that is, in the process of performing mechanized work under capitalist conditions—members of the working class had awakened to their human dignity, so to speak, and forcibly developed “a consciousness of humanity.” “In truth,
The Beginning of the Twentieth Century

consciousness of humanity awakened because of the machine and within the capitalist economic order.” (328, 178)

Because of their relationship to dehumanizing machinery and dehumanizing capital, proletarians had the opportunity to sense their consciousness turning toward the questions, “What am I as a human being?” and “What do I, as a human being, mean in the world?”

I sincerely believe that our consideration of the social question will gain a new footing if we consider this: During the shift from the former merely instinctive view of human dignity and the individual’s place in society to our modern, conscious conception of selfhood, the modern proletariat had a radical experience of being expelled from the old instincts into self-awareness, whereas most other people in different life contexts did not experience the shift as so radically revolutionary. (328, 15)

In lectures after World War I, Rudolf Steiner—who had not only studied the Socialist movement intensively but also witnessed it in part—pointed out repeatedly that until the Social Democratic Party’s adoption of Marxism in the Erfurt Program of 1891, a (justified) central demand of the workers’ movement under Ferdinand Lassalle had been the abolition of the wage relationship as a de facto debasement of the individual person:

Instinctively, in their subconscious feelings, modern proletarians abhor the fact that they are forced to sell their labor power to employers in the same way that goods are sold on the open market. They find it repugnant that their labor is subject to the workings of supply and demand in the labor market just like a commodity. When we recognize abhorrence of “labor as commodity” as one of the basic impulses underlying the entire modern social movement, and when it becomes objectively apparent that even
Socialist theories fail to address this phenomenon radically and with sufficient urgency, then we will have found the starting point for approaching the burning issues related to the modern social movement. (328, 20)

Workers “abhorred” the fact that their labor power was understood as a commodity and issued what Steiner calls a “challenge to humanity” to search for ways of eliminating that commodity character. The bourgeoisie, however, took no interest in the actual situation of the working class, whose life was increasingly determined by material circumstances, leaving the workers who longed for insight and change to their own devices—and thus to the far-reaching consequences of the materialistic Marxist system of thought:

The tragedy of the bourgeois view of life is that it failed to respond at the right point in time. In development of modern capitalism and democracy, the bourgeoisie missed what was needed. Essentially, the chaos we find ourselves in now comes not from below, from the proletariat, but from a misunderstanding of the times that rests squarely in the lap of the bourgeoisie. “It’s my fault, all my fault” is what the leading circles ought to be saying to themselves. This sense of responsibility would engender a sense of what actually needs to happen. (330, 29)

In their longing for insight, proletarians sensed their consciousness “turning toward the questions, ‘What am I as a human being?’ and ‘What do I, as a human being, mean in the world?’” The bourgeoisie failed to understand this phenomenon.21 As a result, so Steiner tells us, the proletarian quest was abandoned to the effects and forces of materialistic thinking, which took hold of the working class with hypnotic power and reoriented it toward “purely economic processes” (23, 51). For working people, this materialistic thinking increasingly became
the “foundation of their awareness of the nature of the human being” (23, 40). The working class and bourgeoisie of the late nineteenth century—responded to scientific materialism—“dead science,” as Rudolf Steiner calls it (185, 50)—in very different ways. Steiner wrote:

To the extent that major streams in world history can be called simultaneous, modern technology and modern capitalism developed simultaneously with modern science, which then won the confidence or faith of the modern proletariat. In their search for new and necessary conscious contents, the proletariat turned to science, relating to it differently in this respect than did the leading classes, who felt no need to make scientific viewpoints the psychological foundation of their view of life. (23, 39)

Members of the bourgeois class came to grips with materialistic views with “theoretical conviction” at best: “They felt no compulsion to relate to life on the feeling level in ways that completely coincided with materialistic thinking. Bourgeois sensibilities still contained vital but unnoticed remnants of a traditional faith in life” (23, 37f.). In contrast, the working class was unconditional in its approach to materialistic science:

Working people took this science completely seriously and drew from it their own conclusions and consequences for life. The age of technology and capitalism affected them differently than it affected the members of the leading classes, whose lives were still ordered and shaped by soulborne impulses. The leading classes had every interest in incorporating modern accomplishments into the existing fabric of their lives. Proletarian souls, however, had been torn out of that fabric, which failed to provide them with any sense of human worth in view of the contents of their lives. Proletarians sensed what being human means
through scientific thinking, the only thing that seemed to emerge from the old order of life with confidence-inspiring energy. (328, 11)

Rudolf Steiner was certainly capable of honoring the life work of Karl Marx as an individual intellectual achievement: “I truly admire Karl Marx for his acute thinking, for his comprehensive view of history, for his great, all-encompassing feeling for the impulses of the modern proletariat, for his formidable critical insight into the self-destructive processes of modern capitalism, and for his many brilliant qualities” (330, 45). At the same time, however, Steiner was quite certain that as a dominant system of thought, materialistic Marxism would have disastrous consequences for both individual consciousness and the social order. In a written statement to this effect, Steiner quotes Goethe’s words:

An inadequate truth continues to work for a certain time, but in place of complete illumination a blinding falsehood suddenly sets in, which satisfies the world and beguiles centuries.

Abstract terms and great arrogance are a sure route to unspeakable misfortune. (24, 35)

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Rudolf Steiner’s tenure at the Berlin Workers’ School was during a time of spiritual upheaval, during years when it was becoming increasingly obvious that the workers’ “challenge to humanity,” as Steiner called it, was being distorted into purely economic demands. The Workers’ School itself fell increasingly under the control of Socialist party politics:

I was confronted with individual working class souls that slumbered and dreamed, and with a collective soul of sorts
that took hold of this portion of humanity, ensnaring its ideas, its judgment, and its attitudes.

We must not imagine, however, that these individual souls had died away. In this respect, I was able to look deeply into the souls of my students and of the working class as a whole. What I saw sustained me in the task I set myself throughout my activity there. At that time, the workers’ position on Marxism was not yet what it would become twenty years later. They treated Marxism with due deliberation, like an economic Gospel, but later they seemed to become possessed by it, their proletarian consciousness filled with what looked like the effects of collective hypnosis (28, 378f.).

It seems to me that the proletarian movement would have developed very differently if a significant number of objective people had followed it with interest and if the proletariat had been treated with understanding. Instead, individuals were left to live their lives within the confines of their own social classes, and each class had only theoretical notions about the other. Wage negotiations took place when strikes or the like made them necessary, and all kinds of truly commendable welfare services were instituted. What was missing, however, was any attempt to consider these questions of world import in the larger spiritual context, which would have been the only way to eliminate the movement’s destructive forces. At that time the “higher classes” were losing their sense of community, and egotism proliferated in ferocious competition. The worldwide catastrophe of the second decade of the twentieth century was already preparing to emerge. On the sidelines, the proletariat developed its own sense of community in the form of proletarian class consciousness. The working class participated in the “culture” developed by the “upper classes” only to the extent that it supplied them with material for justifying proletarian class
consciousness. In the end, there was no bridge left between the different classes. (38, 379)

In 1904 alone, Rudolf Steiner gave ninety lectures in the Workers’ School, but although his students repeatedly gave their non-socialist teacher their vote of confidence, the school’s administration ultimately put an end to Steiner’s teaching activity, which he had been able to continue for two and a half years after becoming general secretary of the Theosophical Society. “I can foresee that it will not work in the long run with people who insist on believing that materialistic ideas condense into bread” (39, 438; April 15, 1904). But by January 19, 1905, after his de facto exclusion from the school, he would have to write (in the above-cited letter to Marie von Sivers), “You know that I saw a mission in my activity in these circles. Here something has really been destroyed that I did not want to see destroyed” (262, 88).

In the preceding years, Rudolf Steiner had still thought that the materialism dominating prevailing dogmas might still be diverted to an idealistic track. In his history courses as well as in other contexts, he had identified the actual spiritual forces affecting the development of human society and culture. He took the (essentially existential) longing of his worker audiences seriously. With them, he discussed many issues and viewpoints that were both physical and metaphysical, opening up broad perspectives that had increasingly become the foundation of individual lives. Basically, socialist materialism and its view of the human being had never really answered these working class questions. Instead, it paralyzed and exploited them, undermining them with ideology and creating a psychological situation with far-reaching consequences:

Within the modern proletariat, any spiritual life that individuals approach through culture had been made to seem mere ideology. And because ideology cannot fill the human soul with enthusiasm or buoyancy or any awareness of
what it actually is in a higher sense, it leaves souls empty and dissatisfied. This psychological emptiness gave rise to the devastated mood of the proletarian worldview, which is one aspect of the real social question. As long as we do not realize that human beings must be cured of inclinations toward ideology, we will be unable to convey positive impulses to souls of the modern proletariat, which will remain filled with mere critiques of the recently developed technological and capitalist economic order and its worldview. (328, p. 59)

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In this connection, Rudolf Steiner continued to see his teaching in the Berlin Workers’ School as essential even after he joined the Theosophical Society. As early as 1903, he had written an article on “Theosophy and Socialism” for the Theosophical publication *Lucifer-Gnosis* and sent this issue—as well as earlier ones—to the school library, “so they would be fully aware of his thinking.” Steiner’s two-part essay “The Social Question and Theosophy” was probably prompted not only by historical events in Russia, Steiner’s experiences at the socialist Workers’ School, and his familiarity with a large number of recent publications on solutions to the “social question” but also by G. L. Dankmar’s extensive monograph, published in Leipzig in the summer of 1905, on the state of European culture in relation to the modern revival of occultism.

In this comprehensive 626-page work, based on publications in “psychic studies” from 1902 to 1904, Dankmar (who was closely aligned with the “empirical spiritualism” of Karl du Prel) attempts to demonstrate the “cultural justification” of occultism.” In particular, Dankmar focuses on the ethical basis of socialism and the “socio-economic fulfillment of moral law.” Dankmar defines “occultism” in broad terms, e.g., “Occultism must become the science of far-flung ideas that have truth as
Die

kulturelle Lage Europas

beim Wiedererwachen
des modernen Okkultismus.

Geistige, soziale und politische Hauptströmungen
dargestellt von

G. L. Dankmar.

Motto: Ungläubige nun hört mich an!
Was ihr anbetet, bet' ich nicht an;
Was ich anbete, betet ihr nicht an;
Euren Glauben gelt ihr, ich meinem unterthan.
Korin: Sero 109.

Leipzig,
Druck und Verlag von Oswald Mutze.
1905.
their content and logic as their form.” He describes the development of occultism from the French Revolution to the end of the nineteenth century, focusing primarily on literary, philosophical, scientific, and economic viewpoints and tendencies.

Most of the book consists of fairly cursory treatments of the utopian socialism of Claude-Henri Saint-Simon, Auguste Compte, Louis Blanc, and François Fourier, along with discussions of Marx and Engels, but in his final chapter (“The Categorical Imperative of Occultism”) Dankmar goes into detail on the contemporary social situation and the Theosophical movement, with reference to Rudolf Steiner’s publications.

The last sixty pages of the book are devoted to an animated sketch of the real privations of the working class in an environment of liberalistic, egocentric individualism and a highly mechanized free-market economy that literally abuses and enslaves workers and their labor power. “It makes sense to talk about freely entering into wage agreements only if the parties are more or less equals. Today, however, employees are all too often forced to hire themselves out at any price. What use are rights if you cannot avail yourself of them?” Dankmar defends the “social thinking” of ethical socialism: “The freedom and equal rights of the economically disadvantaged must be guaranteed in the same way as those of the economically powerful. The well-being of the individual must be the standard for the well-being of the whole. This is the quintessence of social thinking.” At the same time, however, Dankmar emphatically repudiates the political party that stood for this idea: “Socialism must not be confused with the much narrower concept of Social Democracy, which is a political party. As such, it is inherently pig-headed and one-sided, represented by weak and often uneducated or miseducated individuals.” He also emphasizes that the ethical socialist perspective, although it opposes established state churches, is aligned with the original precepts of Christianity: “Christianity means helping the poor, not in the sense of alms, which have become insufficient, but in the sense of eliminating
poverty as such. A single mighty breath of brotherliness and equality pervades the Gospels and the Prophets. As clear as crystal, Christ’s teachings reveal the socialist ethical ideal of the solidarity of the human race.”

Dankmar emphasized the need for a future community ethic that would concretely permit the further development of individuals—especially in their economic and working life. “Industry exists to serve human beings, not vice versa. The only issue is whether the production of goods allows individuals to thrive.” In this context, Dankmar referred to the contribution of the theosophical movement and to Rudolf Steiner, whom he calls “brilliant.” Dankmar was familiar with Steiner’s essays in *Lucifer-Gnosis* and quotes them repeatedly. He emphatically affirms theosophy’s anthropological basis as well as its ideas about incarnation and destiny and its goal of a “brotherhood of humanity,” but he sharply criticizes its tendency to turn away from acute social needs and toward the “beyond.” In this context, he writes:

We can only actively hope that the Theosophical Society, instead of providing murky allegories and a mythical terminology full of mystical and incomprehensible Sanskrit words, will take its principle of universal brotherhood seriously and throw itself into this brotherly activity to a greater extent. Theosophists should be less involved with eschatology because—as R. Steiner rightly observes—“their task lies in [this] life, not in the Beyond.” It is essential for theosophy to flow into all our actions. We must live it.

That said, we are fully justified in asking how theosophy relates to practical issues, to the economic circumstances of individual lives. It certainly makes sense that theosophy, with its fundamental principle of universal brotherhood, also ought to concern itself with socialism, which is based on the same principle. Rudolf Steiner says that “Theosophy must become the soul of social matters.”
But he also charges—and rightly so—that the leaders of socialist efforts actually have no notion of socialist issues, and he finds it lamentable that at a time when the social question has become acute, the thinking of the masses is materialistic. This latter statement is certainly correct. We have already emphasized the perversity of shunting the train of socialism onto materialistic tracks, and we will return to it again. At the same time, however, Steiner admits that the machine and current industrial developments have created the proletariat’s sorry situation (*Lucifer-Gnosis*, 1903, 6, p. 224). In other words, he acknowledges the impact of outer factors in the “karmically ordained environment” on individuals and on the masses. We are locked into real economic categories, and social and ethical activity must always go hand-in-hand. One is impracticable without the other. [...] Individuals living at the poverty level are both economically and culturally suppressed. Is the theosophical camp unaware that profound poverty is a source of immorality? [...] Above all, what we need is not sanctimonious theosophical talk but improvement in basic living conditions. [...] All theosophical ideas that do not adapt to existing economic conditions are mere worthless utopias. [...]

Steiner makes a carefully worded statement (*Lucifer-Gnosis*, 1903, 3, p. 115) to the effect that if the self-serving inertia of the bourgeoisie stands in the way of cultural progress, it will be superseded by higher ideals (although he does not say which ideals). Theosophy in general, however, is completely dismissive of (or at least indifferent to) practical issues. It even takes a certain pride in being unworldly. Died-in-the-wool theosophists are very reluctant to descend to earth from devachanic and karmic heights; they would sooner chew on ten Sanskrit words than inform themselves about the minimum basic pension. [...]
So far, unfortunately, theosophical activity has cloaked itself in Sanskrit and remained a mystery to most people. All too often, it has been the province of a spiritual aristocracy that enjoys the contemplative calm of a carefree existence and devotes itself to higher spiritual and psychological forms of recreation from that unworldly vantage point. As certain as it may be that occultism—as a pure phenomenon—cannot function on the ethical or cultural level without theosophy, it is equally certain that theosophy will become a significant factor in our culture only if it adapts to the real economic needs of its time. Let us hope that the theosophists will descend from their higher planes of existence to become pioneers of ethical progress on solid ground. May they place themselves in the practical service of humanity, and may their ethical striving focus on cultural activity! If theosophy descends from its icy isolation to consort with the common folk, if it truthfully and seriously places the ethical demand for universal brotherhood at the top of its program and acts accordingly without fear of the consequences, it will transform Christ’s words “love thy neighbor” into social action and will become (and remain) the exquisite and inalienable property of all humanity.35

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In a certain respect, Rudolf Steiner’s social essays in *Lucifer-Gnosis*, which were published just a few months after Dankmar’s monograph and referred to it both directly and indirectly, were a concrete response to its questions and omissions. Steiner agreed not only with Dankmar’s criticism but also, for the most part, with the intentions he formulated for the future: “Social history is humanity’s progress from the good to the better, and its ultimate goal is a community of individuals who want to be free, a community in which each one takes ownership of the other person’s objectively justified aims.36 With regard to society in its
existing form and the future orientation of the spiritual science that he represented, Steiner wrote:

For several reasons, [the spiritual-scientific movement] cannot show itself now in the face it will wear someday. One reason is that in order to first gain a foothold, it must address a particular group of people. [...] To the extent that suitable circumstances ensue, spiritual science will also find forms of expression that allow it to speak to other circles. (34, 220)

The “real fruit” of theosophical spiritual science, said Steiner, is by no means inner peace and private happiness for individuals. Rather, spiritual science—as a consistent means of training human thought and soul forces—makes it possible to “take up the tasks [of practical life] with insight and to seek ways and means of arriving at solutions” (34, 193). Every social activity or reform requires real “understanding of life”—that is, well-founded judgment about life and its alignments, a “clear, objective view of the forces and powers at work in the world.”37 The “life teachings of spiritual science” result in a concrete training that successively enhances perception and cognition of the forces at work while simultaneously developing the moral will needed to intervene in the world in a healing way: “Working our way through spiritual-scientific ideas means enhancing our capacity for social action. In this connection, it is important not only which thoughts we take in through spiritual science, but what we do with our thinking as a result (34, 196).

Rudolf Steiner conceded that Dankmar was right in stating that the present state of the theosophical moment still revealed little of these developments and that in principle, therefore, all of Dankmar’s expressed doubts and critiques were justified. Nonetheless, said Steiner, spiritual-scientific theosophy was only in “the early stages of its activity.” “As it continues to progress, it will introduce itself into all of life’s practical aspects.” 38
In *Lucifer-Gnosis*, Rudolf Steiner’s description of “Theosophy and the Social Question,” which led to the formulation of the fundamental social law, had been immediately preceded by long articles about the path of spiritual training—essays published years later in book form under the title *How to Know Higher Worlds*. Even in these essays, with their esoteric language and style of presentation (and especially in the last one, published shortly before his social essay), Rudolf Steiner had pointed out that achieving devotion and readiness to make sacrifices, along with loving and liberating one’s “surroundings,” were unconditional prerequisites to entering the higher, spirit world. There he wrote:

> Therefore, occultists of the white path cannot be expected to provide instructions for developing the personal, egotistical “I.” They do not have the slightest interest in the individual’s bliss. We may achieve that for ourselves, but white occultists are not charged with accelerating the process. They are simply concerned with the development and liberation of all beings, whether humans or the companions of humans. That is why they provide instruction only in how to develop the forces needed to participate in this work and why they place more importance on selfless devotion and readiness to make sacrifices than on all other qualities. (10, 214)

> “Ora et labora was the Benedictine rule in the early development of Christianity. Pray—develop your being to comprehend the world spiritually—and *work*—apply your strengths in the service of others”39 (Benediktus Hardorp).

and Theosophy”), and November 23 (“Brotherliness and the Struggle for Existence”). In them, Steiner further developed these esoteric social perspectives in the light of contemporary challenges and in sharp contrast to prevailing social Darwinist paradigms. In the same location, in a Christmas lecture given on December 14, 1905, a few months before his first presentations on a spiritual-scientifically based art of education, he said:

What we intend to send out into the world is not just a dogma, not mere teachings or simply a philosophy, but life. Ideally, everything we say and teach, everything contained in our writings and our science, should make the transition into life, and it will do so when people practice spiritual science in all aspects of daily life. We will no longer need to talk about spiritual science when, without mentioning the term “theosophy” or “spiritual science,” its life resounds in the words spoken to the faithful from all pulpits; when all courts consider human actions with a spiritual scientific sensibility; when all physicians approach and cure patients on the basis of spiritual science; when schoolteachers model spiritual science for growing children—in short, when spiritual science underlies everything thought, felt, and done on all our streets, then spiritual-scientific teachings will become superfluous. Our ideal will have been achieved; spiritual science will be an everyday matter. (54, 249f.)

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