

COSMIC FLAVOUR, SPIRITUAL NUTRITION?: THE BIODYNAMIC AGRICULTURAL METHOD AND THE LEGACY OF RUDOLF STEINER'S ANTHROPOSOPHY IN WINE

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Introduction

Arguably one of Western esotericism's most ambitious and widely influential thinkers, Rudolf Steiner has left an astonishing legacy of cultural products that continue to have influence beyond the institutional reach of Anthroposophy, the new religious movement he founded. One such legacy is his system of agriculture, known today as Biodynamic agriculture, or Biodynamics. This method, combining a distrust of modern argo-chemical applications and a desire to spiritually, as well as physically, nourish the individual, is now disseminated in a range of industries, and is often applied in ways that have little to do with Anthroposophy or Steiner. The current fascination in the wine industry for Biodynamic methods serves as a useful example for exploring what Steiner believed and set out for farmers, as well as for highlighting how these techniques are used today. Lorand's (1996) paradigm for understanding Biodynamic Agriculture is here used to frame a discussion utilising a production of culture perspective that looks at elements of culture as shaped by the system within which they created, promoted, taught, and appraised (Peterson 1976). In order to understand how and why an esoteric agricultural method is today flourishing, their origins must first be examined.

To begin, Steiner's teachings on agriculture will be summarised so as to move the discussion forward. This summary is, by necessity, a generalisation of Steiner's thoughts as his output was astounding; consisting of some forty published books, 6,000 lectures (for which there are notes), and volumes of selected letters. As such, only those issues highlighted by Steiner in his 1924 Agricultural Course are examined here. Following this, for the purposes of discussion this chapter focuses on the application of Biodynamic methods in the modern wine industry. Material drawn from wine makers and growers, wine critics, and from scholarly sources is used to show that the small but popular methods have become solidly embedded within some winemaking, and wine consuming

circles. These features also provide the content with which to fill-out theories of cultural production. The discussion of the practices (and their associated beliefs) of Biodynamic Agriculture as a cultural product proves somewhat difficult. As Hirsch (Hirsch 1972) has defined them, cultural products – non-material goods that serve aesthetic and expressive functions – typically reside in the artistic realm. The non-material and expressive aspects of Biodynamics makes it a ‘product’ that may be ‘consumed.’

Steiner’s Agricultural Methods and Biodynamic Agriculture

Biodynamic Agriculture is a farming system that emphasises food quality through soil health. Its current popularity in some sections of the wine-making industry is not without controversy, stemming mostly from the scientifically unproven claims Steiner made in support of the techniques, and their underpinning philosophies. The methods are drawn from a series of eight lectures Steiner gave in 1924 called the Agriculture Course.¹ One of the basic principles of the Biodynamic system is the conception of the farm as an organism, or an “agricultural individuality” as Steiner (Lecture 2, Steiner 1958) termed it. Emphasis is placed upon a holistic management of this individuality, of which the farmer is a part, including the integration of livestock, crops, soil maintenance, and the recycling of soil nutrients (such as through manure). In addition, this outlook also addresses the local environment in which the farm is located, as well as its financial and social components and impacts of the farm unit. Convinced that the use of chemical fertilisers in modern agriculture was causing the degeneration of food to the point at which it would be no longer suitable for humans (Lecture 1, Steiner 1958), Steiner proposed a change in agriculture that would give up pesticides and inorganic chemicals in favour of utilising ‘cosmic forces.’ These forces would act upon nature’s own material and be used as organic fertilisers, while pests would be managed by making the farm into a harmonious

¹ The lectures, eight in all, will henceforth be referenced as ‘Lecture 1’, ‘Lecture 2,’ and so on. In each case they refer to the lecture transcriptions found on the Rudolf Steiner Archive, which are copyrighted 1958.

agricultural system. The techniques Steiner set out, he argued, would also give the farmer control over the influence of both terrestrial and cosmic forces as they related to their farm.

Demeter, the Biodynamic Agriculture certification program, was established in 1928, making it the first formalised label for ecological, or more commonly today, 'green', produce. At its heart, however, the Agriculture Course that birthed Biodynamics was an expression of the spiritual beliefs of a New Religious Movement in which Steiner talked about "the basic new way of thinking about the relationship of earth and soil to the formative forces of the etheric, astral, and ego activity of nature" (Pfeiffer 1958). The health of soil, plants and animals, Steiner argued, was dependant on being connected with cosmic creative and shaping forces. Steiner's philosophy of agriculture was thus directed at reanimating the natural forces, which he saw as waning in the face of modern agricultural practices. Lorand (1996: 15) characterises the cosmic aspect to Biodynamics as a system that sees the universe as a "spiritual-physical matrix" in which the celestial rhythms effect plant and animal life on Earth, and the substances of the Earth (such as minerals in soil) are the carriers for cosmic forces. Steiner argued that Anthroposophical Science must investigate the interrelatedness of the whole cosmos (Lecture 1, Steiner 1958). Indeed, the first lecture of the Agriculture Course signals the tone of the worldview that underpins Biodynamics; "we shall never understand plant life unless we bear in mind that everything which happens on the Earth is but a reflection of what is taking place in the Cosmos" (Lecture 1, Steiner 1958). The intangible, invisible, and qualitatively elusive elements and forces at work are seen as different to those of the material or physical realm that is the focus of modern science.

Biodynamic agriculture is distinguished from other 'alternative' and organic practices by its use of nine 'preparations' that are believed to enhance soil health and stimulate plant growth. These preparations are divided into 'field preparations' and 'compost preparations', and while not explicitly regarded as fertilisers themselves, they are regarded by Biodynamic organisations as assisting the fertilising process (Biodynamic Agriculture Australia 2004). The preparations are used in conjunction with practices such as crop rotation, composting, manuring, and the integration of livestock with crops. Weeds and pests are seen as indicators of imbalances in soil composition, poor plant health, or poor health in animals, each of which are related back to cosmic imbalance in their

management. These are then controlled through the reuse of the weeds and pests to make specific products for their control. Interestingly, those attending Steiner's lectures were experienced farmers. It seems likely that Steiner was not intending to 'teach farming' as some critics have contested, but rather to supplement established farming practices (Steiner 1993: ix).

The preparations themselves are a mix of mineral, plant, and animal manure extracts. Typically these are 'fermented'² and applied at high dilutions to composts, manures, the soil, or directly to the foliage of the plants themselves, after a process of stirring called 'dynamization,' whereby the water is stirred or agitated for a long period, ideally creating a whirlpool which is then broken by reversing the direction of the stirrer repeatedly for up to an hour. Numbered 500-508, each was developed by Steiner and described in the Agriculture Course, though it is curious to note that Biodynamic Agriculture Australia, for example, says that they "were developed out of *indications* given by... Steiner" (Biodynamic Agriculture Australia 2004 author's emphasis); a subtle but quite important use of words that appears to distance Steiner from the modern movement, as Steiner's instructions are quite clear. The Horse Manure Preparation (500) is employed as a spray to enliven root growth and humus formation. It is made from cow manure that has been placed in a cow horn and buried in the autumn to ferment underground and be dug up in the spring. The cow horns act, according to Steiner (Lecture 4, Steiner 1958), as antennae for concentrating cosmic forces into the humus and silica (Kirchmann 1994: 176). Horn Silica Preparation (501), which is said to enhance "the light and warmth assimilation of the plant" (Biodynamic Agriculture Australia 2004) is made from powdered quartz, again packed inside a cow horn, though here buried in the soil for the six months through spring and summer. It then applied as a foliar spray to stimulate growth. In his opening lecture for the course Steiner spoke of silica as functioning to mediate cosmic forces, and its centrality in Biodynamic philosophy speaks to this.

The other preparations, BD 502-507, are used for the preparation of composts to "help the dynamic cycles of the macro- and micro-nutrients" in the soil (Biodynamic Agriculture Australia 2004). These are added in what Diver termed "homeopathic quantities" (Diver 1999), with applications as small as five millilitres per ten tonnes of compost. The

² This is a problematic term in some cases. For example the fermentation of silica is simply not possible. See Trewavas (2004).

compost preparations are made of a range of plant materials; No. 502 consists of yarrow flowers pressed into a red deer stag's urine bladder to dry in the summer sun, be buried in soil during the winter, and dug up for use in the spring. Similarly, for No. 503, chamomile flowers are placed into the small intestine of a cow and then buried in the autumn and dug up in spring. For No. 504, stinging nettles are stuffed into peat and buried for a year. For No. 505, small pieces of oak tree bark are put into the skull of a domesticated animal which is surrounded by peat and buried in the soil near a water course. Dandelion flowers are used to prepare No. 506. These are pressed together and placed in a cow's peritoneum, and again buried over the winter to be dug up in spring. Finally, No. 507 is an extraction of valerian flowers into water.

Each of these preparations is intended to assist in the regulation and control of biological and astral forms on the farm (Diver 1999). The yarrow is used to control sulphur and potassium reactions so as to facilitate the absorption of cosmic radiation. Camomile is thought to affect the relationship of potassium and calcium, and mediate the health of soil. Stinging nettle removes "iron effect", and when mixed with manure makes it "inwardly sensitive... we might say almost intelligent" (Lecture 5, Steiner 1958). The other compost preparations are similarly believed to affect calcium levels, silicic acid take-up, and "phosphoric substance."³ While not used for composting, a ninth preparation, No. 508, is a decoction of horsetail (*equisetum*) or casuarina plants is used to combat the effects of excess moisture.

In addition to the preparations that are sprayed over fields, cops, and manures, the Biodynamic Agricultural method also promotes the idea that the plant world comes under astronomical influences. Soil and plant development is believed to be under the influence of astronomical bodies, with the sun and moon given as easily observable and measurable examples. However, the other planets are also taken into consideration, with the timing of Biodynamic practices including the making of preparations and planting and harvesting times made to coincide with certain lunar, and astronomical and astrological cycles. Steiner posited that plant reproduction is related/connected to the forces of the Moon, Venus, and Mercury, and that plant growth and flowering are connected with Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, oddly stating that "no doubt this appears as a simple piece of information"

³ Steiner does not explain what this is.

(Lecture 1, Steiner 1958). Woven in to the Biodynamic ontology is the belief that plant growth is affected by the subtle forces of celestial bodies. Steiner proposed that formative, or etheric forces imbued the essentially lifeless physical substances of the Earth (like rocks) with life and form. This imbued form he variously termed “life-body,” “formative body” or the “etheric body,” and it is this aspect of plant life that is understood to be most highly influenced by the rhythms of the cosmos.

The life force and life body that make up all living things Steiner understood as responsive to cosmic rhythms, even if such rhythms might not register with modern science. Biodynamic agriculture, as such, is concerned with the cosmic life of plants and animals. As a system of ‘agricultural science,’ it maintains that it accepts biological facts, but applies a ‘dynamic spiritual understanding’ to them. In particular, Biodynamics understands plant and animal life on Earth as having profound and intimate connection with cosmic forces generated by the sun and the planets of our solar system. As a result, the Biodynamic technique also involves the use of an astronomical calendar with which farmers can determine planting and harvesting times. For example, the opposition of the moon to Saturn is understood to be a ‘fruit day’ and conducive to fleshy ‘expressive’ and spiritually nourishing fruit (Lecture 6, Steiner 1958). Similarly, the lunar cycle is thought to affect the formation of fruit on plants, while forces from Venus affected animal reproduction (Kirchmann 1994). The lunar cycle is also used to time the planting of crops and the growth phases of plants (Reganold 1995). However, despite their prominence in the current literature, only scant, passing references are made to the use of astronomical calendars for planting and harvesting in Steiner’s lectures. Nor is any mention made of Ahriman, the spiritual being Steiner saw as responsible for spreading chaos and obscuring the spiritual sight of human beings (Lachman 2007: 178), though there are some sections of the early lectures where Steiner seems to hinting towards such ideas (see Lecture 1, Steiner 1958).

Philosophical Underpinnings of Biodynamics

In order to grasp the underlying principles of Biodynamics it is necessary to approach the concept of spiritual science that Steiner promoted. The controversy over Biodynamics practices and their alleged efficacy stems from both the content of the instructions, as set out by Steiner, and less obviously from the underlying Anthroposophical beliefs that underpin the system as a whole. For Kirchmann the reasons a farmer might take up Biodynamic Agriculture remain baffling unless a connection can be made with the Anthroposophy beneath them (Kirchmann 1994), yet it seems that for many farmers in the wine industry this is simply not important. Lorand (1996), who has represented Biodynamic associations to the European Union, argued in his doctoral thesis that comprehension of the Biodynamic system involved gaining a threefold paradigmatic understanding of the ontology, epistemology, and methodology that lies behind it. The agricultural method was, for Steiner, 'spiritually based' and thus also essential for proper, holistic nutrition. In food, Steiner saw a resource for building a bridge between will and action, supplying "the strength necessary for manifesting the spirit in physical life" (Steiner 1984: 411). The lectures of the Agricultural Course are filled with the stuff of Anthroposophy, in particular Steiner's central thesis of a connection between the physical and the spiritual, the latter of which he felt was ignored by both modern science and modern agriculture.

After returning to Dornach, in Switzerland (the home of Anthroposophy), following the lectures, Steiner gave a report to members of the Society, remarking on;

The real possibility of bringing something originating in Anthroposophy right into practical life. It shows that it is possible for Anthroposophy to work from both the most highly spiritual side and from the most practical. In actuality we are only working in the right way when those two sides are woven together in complete harmony...

In the course of this materialistic age of ours, we've lost the knowledge of what it takes to continue to care for the natural world... People fertilize scientifically now; and the grains and potatoes and everything else become ever worse. People know this... yet today there is only resistance to practical measures that derive from what can be gained in spiritual vision (Steiner 1993: 10).

His excitement at having a cultural product capable of broad deployment well outside the expressionistic walls of Anthroposophia, is evident. The above quotation also highlights, as Lorand points out (1996: 44), his opposition to 'natural scientific' methods, favouring instead his own 'spiritual scientific' ones.

Anthroposophy was, for Steiner, a method of research into the super-sensible. This 'spiritual science' was (and is) conceived as the necessary compliment to 'natural science' such as famously championed in Steiner's time by Charles Darwin. The study of the super-sensible in human beings, and thus of spiritual beings, ultimately seeking scientific answers to questions such as, 'who was and is Jesus Christ?' (Fränkel-Lundborg 1979). Washington described Steiner as "one who never lost the sense that there is beyond – and yet somehow immanent in – the visible world a celestial realm accessible to the spiritual eye" (Washington 1995: 146-147). This sentiment was indeed the character of Steiner's endeavours; to find the spiritual that was at work within the physical. Anthroposophy as a movement in and of itself, however, is somewhat amorphous; described by Lorand as a "philosophy and cultural movement known by a common name" (Lorand 1996: 33).

Steiner himself was at times quite ambiguous about what Anthroposophy was;

Above all one must know what the true standard and content of Anthroposophy should be. It does not consist of a sum of opinions which must be entertained by 'anthroposophists'. It ought never to be said amongst anthroposophists, "We believe this", "We reject that." Such agreement may arise naturally as the result of our anthroposophical study, but it can never be put forward as an anthroposophical 'programme'. The right attitude can only be: "Anthroposophy is there. It has been acquired by persistent effort. I am here to represent it, so that what has thus been acquired may be made known in the world" (Steiner 1963: 52).

Similarly, on the Anthroposophical Society itself, his emphasis seems to have been as much on what it was not, as on what it was;

The General Anthroposophical Society is in no sense a secret society, but an entirely public organization. Without distinction of nationality, social standing, religion, scientific or artistic conviction, any person who

considers the existence of such an institution as the Goetheanum in Dornach – School for Spiritual Activity in Science and Art – to be justified, can become a member of the Society. The Anthroposophical Society is averse to any kind of sectarian tendency. Politics it does not consider to be among its tasks (Steiner 1963: 5).

Nonetheless, in Anthroposophy Steiner did have both a set of aims and a purpose driving his incredible cultural output that ranged from the agricultural methods discussed here to art, music, dance, the formation of society, and as discussed in other chapters in this volume, schooling and architecture. In its original form, biodynamic agriculture forms a part of the comprehensive way of life set out by Steiner in the Anthroposophical movement. One of the core claims is that biodynamic food has a higher nutritional value, is more nutritionally complex (spiritually, more on this below), and will in fact taste better. Steiner discussed his own dissatisfaction with the flavour of potatoes in his time, when compared to the potatoes he had eaten as a child as an example of how degraded food produce had become (others might call this nostalgia). As Diver (1999) notes, this claim is not unique to Biodynamic agriculture, with many other systems similarly asserting the sapid superiority of their produce over that of the ‘industrialised’ or ‘conventional’ methods. However, what sets biodynamic agriculture apart from most other ‘alternative’ farming systems is, firstly, the worldview it was developed to operate within, and secondly, the notion that the nutritional value gained is not only physical, but spiritual also.

The formative, etheric forces Steiner understood as working on plant growth has its roots in Goethe’s notion of the *Urpflanze*; the archetypal or primal plant (Lachman 2007: 218), a concept Goethe used to describe the “dynamic correlation between permanence and change” (Larson 1967: 596) in and between all plant life.

The plant, as we saw, has a physical body and an ether-body, while up above it is hovered-around, more or less, by a kind of astral cloud. The plant itself does not reach up to the astral, but the astral – so to speak – hovers around it. Wherever it enters into definite connection with the astral (as happens in the fruit-formation), something available as foodstuff is produced – that is to say, something which will support the astral in the animal and human body (Lecture 8, Steiner 1958).

With this quote it is plain to see that Steiner saw food as spiritual nourishment as well as physical. This is, perhaps, the best explanation for what the intent of the Biodynamic agricultural method was, for Steiner. It was more than a nostalgic response to the industrialisation of the agricultural industries (see his potato ramblings); it was, in fact, a consistent extension of his philosophy of humanity, and one that has been disproportionately influential since its development, as evidenced by its prominence in the wine industry as discussed below.

The Sacred as Terroir: Biodynamic Wine Case Study

It may be that the wine industry was first alerted to Biodynamics by Steiner's mention of the difficulties facing the industry. In Lecture Six of the Agriculture Course, Steiner talked specifically about problems facing grape growers at the time, particularly phylloxera. Since Steiner's lectures (the only time he gave any public information on the techniques) the practices he set out have been formalised and codified into what is now known as Biodynamic Agriculture. It was pursued with relative enthusiasm in a number of locations around the world, though interestingly remained largely unknown in the U.S.A. until recently (Diver 1999). In the past 50 years it has gained increasing popularity and usage, particularly as global environmental concerns have captured public imaginations. Since the late 1990s Biodynamic practices have gained a notable amount of press in the wine industry. The small scale level of fascination with biodynamic wines around the world serves to illustrate the covert popularity of Steiner's ideas within wider society and consumer culture, as well as how this cultural product has been disseminated.

For lovers of wine the important thing to understand is, first of all, the Dionysian nature of the vine, and secondly the need to respect this so that it can connect as well as possible with subtleties of soil and climate – so that, in other words, it can best marry its innate authenticity with the quality of the place where it grows (Joly 2007: 22).

In the above quote, Nicholas Joly speaks of wine as if it were made for Biodynamic methodology, which for him goes without saying; he is an outspoken promoter of

Biodynamic methods. However, in Joly's words there is an expression of a familiar theme in 'wine.' When we refer here to 'wine' we are not simply referring to the product of fermented grape juice but to something much larger. It is a term that is used as a shorthand for a culture of consumption, both conspicuous and cerebral, that encompasses ideals concerning modes of production, gastronomy, class mobility, and sensory pleasure. It typically also refers to the product and its associated culture as something steeped in historical significance, a human endeavour that somehow carries a fascination with place and people, that is the muse of uncounted numbers of poets, and even concerns matters such as the aesthetics of glassware. Wine also engages with tourism, with ideals of style and sophistication, and, let us not forget, the eminently social effects of alcohol enjoyed in the company of others with food. 'Wine' is a thing that can be drunk, engaged with as a hobby, given as a gift, tasted on holiday, and that can act as a portal to local cultures because of its close association with cuisine and with customs of leisure. Indeed, it is, to some (e.g. Scruton 2010), the distinction between the civilised and the uncivilised. It is curious, then, for the purposes of the present chapter, that Biodynamic techniques have found some popularity within the modern wine industry. This compels us to search for answers as to why this cultural product of Steiner's fits into this complex and diverse phenomenon.

For some winemakers, the Biodynamic method is the ultimate way to 'connect' with their grapes and express the unique character of the vineyard. Steiner's emphasis on sustainability, soil and plant health, and on 'individuality' all lend themselves to the fraught and fragile wine grape. Cullen Wines, for example, states that their philosophy of winemaking is "to search for the best quality expression of the vineyard in the wine" (Cullen Wines n.d. a) and to "interfere as little as possible in the winemaking process and thus essentially let the wines make themselves" (Cullen Wines n.d. b). The winery's website states that the techniques are concerned firstly with soil health and sustainability, and secondly with aligning with cosmic forces. In so doing, the company claims that "this approach has resulted in the production of high quality and individual wines" (Cullen Wines n.d. b). This view is shared by many notable winemakers, Joly the most outspoken of them; "In biodynamie we are connecting the vine to the frequencies it needs—like tuning a radio, we are tuning the plant to the frequencies that bring it life. Organics

permits nature to do its job; biodynamie permits it to do its job more. It is very simple” (Joly quoted in Goode n.d.).

This belief is not without controversy, however. Some critics, and other winemakers, challenge the merits and the results of the Biodynamic method. Californian grower Stuart Smith maintains a blog, *Biodynamics is a Hoax*, and remarks that Steiner was “a complete nutcase, a flimflam man with a tremendous imagination, a combination if you will, of an LSD-dropping Timothy Leary with the showmanship of a P.T. Barnum” (Smith 2010). Recently the *Wall Street Journal* weighed in to the perennial debate about Biodynamic Agriculture and wine with an article that looked briefly at the question of whether Biodynamics is simply organic agriculture under a fancy name (McInerney 2010); an exercise in branding more than anything else. What is more, the difficult and elusive concept of *terroir* – the expression of place, environment, and climate in a wine – makes for excellent advertising copy. It also makes for a useful form of brand (place) loyalty; “If a wine is valued for its expression of a specific place, it can’t be supplanted by another wine from the other side of the globe” (Reilly 2004a).

What makes the case of Biodynamic practices in the wine industry unique is the question of results. One article in the magazine *Selector*, quoted grower Rob Bryans on just this issue; “I find a lot of the spiritual side of it a bit frustrating. But look at that soil: as a means to an end, all I can say is that the Biodynamic methods work” (Allen 2007a). In an industry whose appeal ranges from quaffing plonk to wines that move drinkers and critics alike to torrents of whimsy and descriptive, the issue of flavour and yield is a constant paramount. Renowned wine writer Jancis Robinson noted of Biodynamic methodology that, “On paper it sounds completely crazy, or at least a wholemeal sandwich short of a picnic, but when you see the health of the grapes that result and, perhaps even more importantly, the vibrancy of the wines typically produced, it is increasingly convincing” (Robinson 2006). For higher valued wines in particular, the issue of unique flavour, that esoteric quality of *terroir*, becomes a much sought after quality. It is, coincidentally, precisely this that Biodynamics aims at, with its focus on the ‘agricultural individuality’ and soil health. But all this would be for nothing if the results simply were not there, and, at least to some, they are:

most of the certified biodynamic practitioners I have spoken to over the years, none of whom were obviously certifiable, started with organic farming and moved on to biodynamics. And all of them profess to have seen superior results and healthier vineyards under the latter regime (McInerney 2010).

Indeed, a blind tasting of Biodynamic wines against ‘normal’ wines, organised by *Fortune Magazine*, resulted in a resounding success for Steiner’s methods. Nine out of ten of the pairs tasted were judged in favour of the Biodynamic wine, which, “were found to have better expressions of terroir, the way in which a wine can represent its specific place of origin in its aroma, flavor, and texture” (Reilly 2004b). Tellingly, however, article also mentions several of the panellists belief that Biodynamic winemakers tend to be artistic, intensely focussed craftspeople; just the type to create wines of uncompromising character.

The level of passion among some followers the phenomenon prompted wine critic Alan Meadows, to state that “It has cult-like aspects; it reminds me of Jimmy Swaggart” (quoted in Reilly 2004a). Yet perhaps the greatest argument for Biodynamic practices in wine is made by the list of names that use them. Indeed, some of the names associated with Biodynamics in the wine industry are amongst the most revered of the great French labels, including Chapoutier, Coulée de Serrant, and Zind Humbrecht, and a group of grand cru producers in Burgundy including Domaine Leflaive, and, in the much exalted Vosne-Romanée commune, Domaine Leroy and Domaine de la Romanée-Conti. So lofty are these names in the world of wine that one can forgive the reference to ‘cult-like aspects’, as many of the wines from these producers truly could be said to be ‘worshipped.’ Similarly, in New World wineries Biodynamics has also found some converts, with North American wineries such as Beaux Frères, the New Zealand Felton Road, and Australian Bindi Wine Growers and Cullen Wines to name just a handful. It also seems to have convinced some high profile critics. Doug Frost MW stated that; “The biodynamic movement seems like latent ‘60s acid-trip-inspired lunacy; until you taste the wines” (quoted in Reilly 2004b). This scepticism of the methods and love of results is not uncommon. Australian wine critic Max Allen, a keen Biodynamic wine devotee, enthuses that;

I noticed that, more often than not, well-made biodynamic wines were sending a chill down my spine with their intensity and complexity of flavour. They not only tasted better than most ‘conventional’ – even organic – wines. They tasted different (Allen 2007b).

Whatever the truth of the matter, many wine makers and wine critics alike see value, however that may be measured, in following, and being seen to follow, Biodynamic viticultural practices. This popularity, however, is not an accurate measure of Anthroposophical beliefs in the wine industry. As some of the comments noted above indicate, many winemakers are keen to dismiss the spiritual side of Biodynamics and focus instead on the quality of the grape. A complete and literal belief in Steiner's worldview would mean ignoring significant scientific facts and methodologies. Indeed, Kirchmann has argued that, "In contrast to other alternative forms of farming, biodynamic agriculture is based on unscientific methods, misleading measures and unprovable assumptions about natural" (Kirchmann 1994: 184). A piece by Max Allen in the magazine *Gourmet Traveller* perhaps best sums up the way in which Steiner's spirituality has been placed aside in the quest for good wine; "Emphasising the spiritual side of biodynamic viticulture is, perhaps, not the best way to see it widely accepted here. Our grape-growers are a no-bullshit bunch, mostly, and glaze over when people talk about cosmic forces" (Allen n.d.: 65). Similarly, Robinson has commented that,

The biodynamic producers I most respect have adapted biodynamic methods to their own particular environment and are deeply embarrassed by some of the wilder claims associated with the theory. And many – perhaps most – of them don't even use biodynamics to sell their wines (Robinson 2006).

Nonetheless, Steiner's agricultural method retains a level of popularity – what might be called a 'cult status' – among wine makers and wine lovers around the world. The Anthroposophy behind it, it seems, does not.

Biodynamics as a Cultural Product of Steiner and Anthroposophy

When Paul Hirsch penned his seminal article on cultural products in 1972, he likely had little idea what an important work it would become.⁴ Hirsch argued that cultural products were non-material goods that generally served expressive and/or aesthetic purposes, rather than clearly utilitarian ones (Hirsch 1972: 641-642). While Hirsch classified foods as ‘utilitarian’ products, rather than cultural ones, it is the contention of this chapter that the non-material and expressive aspects of Biodynamics makes it a ‘product’ that may be ‘consumed’. As a cultural product, thus, Biodynamics can also be said to be shaped by the various systems within which it was created, and is now distributed, evaluated, taught, and maintained (Peterson and Anand 2004). This includes, for the present study, a range of ‘gatekeepers’ as Hirsch (1972) called them; the various formal Biodynamic organisations (such as Biodynamic Agriculture Australia) that are responsible for education and the dissemination of information; the winemaking industry; individual winemakers (as the producers of the ingestible product to which the appellation ‘biodynamic’ is attached); and the growing industry of wine criticism which, as noted above (e.g. Goode n.d.; Robinson 2006), tends to focus on the final product, though clearly likes the emphasis of ‘place’ that Biodynamics champions. However, as a cultural product today, Biodynamics calls upon Steiner’s initial teachings only insofar as they prove useful for the cultural industry as a whole.

Steiner felt that art, architecture, music, and, of course, food were all wound up in Anthroposophy’s aims and purpose; to bring the spiritual more fully into people’s lives. As Cusack’s chapter in this volume discusses, the Goetheanum, the building Steiner himself designed, was intended as a centrepiece in this project. Just as that building was to be an ‘organic form’ that would provide the space for people to understand the “connection in the human form between thinking, feeling, and willing” (Lachman 2007: 179), food produced Biodynamically would help strengthen those connections. In particular, it was the latter – ‘willing’ – that Steiner understood was to most benefit from a Biodynamic diet. Willing, he argued, was linked to our metabolic system (the other two representing the neural and the circulatory systems respectively) (Lachman 2007: 188). To these Steiner also linked the idea of society, promoting a concept of the “threefold order,” which the ideals of the French Revolution – liberty, equality, fraternity – expressed. In

⁴ Indeed, a later article he acknowledged that he submitted the “Processing Fads and Fashions” article as a graduate student on a dare from a roommate (Hirsch 2000: 356).

other words, Steiner argued that thinking, the world of culture and creativity should be governed by the freedom of the individual. The political sphere, that of feeling and the circulatory system, demanded recognition of equality, while the social metabolism, economy, needed to operate in such a way that wealth was created not for individual gain, but for communal good.⁵ It is into this understanding of society that Biodynamics is inserted within Anthroposophical spheres. The case is different, however, when the agricultural methods are examined as a cultural product in the wider social world.

What the current level of popularity of Biodynamics evidenced by the wine industry can demonstrate, is a movement both towards individuated forms of the sacred (and by extension traditional religiosity), and a gathering interest in modes of consumption that are other than ‘industrial.’ In the confluence of these two seemingly separate social milieus – ideas of the sacred and alternative food choices – Biodynamics (and a suite of other alternate forms of production not here covered) finds an audience neatly attuned to its ideas of ‘individuality’ and environmental sustainability. As currently practiced by most vignerons and consumers of wine, however, Biodynamics could not conventionally be described as ‘religious practice’; nor even religious belief in many cases. There are, however, strong indications from both that the practice is located within the social boundaries of ‘environmentalism’ and ‘being green,’ and to locators of personal identity and meaning in terms of everyday life (e.g. Cullen Wines n.d.; Allen 2007b; Joly 2007). The latter, in particular, has been linked to modern, secular notions of the sacred (Demerath 2000), with many authors now asserting the religiously functional elements to be found in social life (e.g. Lyon 2000). Nor should the assertions of Erving Goffman (1959) about the performance of the everyday self be forgotten here. The choice to produce or to consume a Biodynamic product thus carries multidimensional meanings for the individual, and forms part of an individual’s expression of identity.

Of course, while some Durkheimian treatments may find the concept of ‘individual religion’ oxymoronic, it is important to acknowledge here the steadily growing body literature that looks to describe these types of phenomena. It may seem a trepidatious leap to describe Biodynamics – practiced, as it is, largely without reference to Steiner’s

⁵ Steiner published this theory in “The Threefold Social Order” (published in Steiner 1999) which for a time gained some popularity around the world, and, according to Lachman (2007: 189), sold some eighty thousand copies in its first year of publication.

metaphysical elements – in such a way, but doing so gives a much finer understanding of the gradations of meaning that may become attached to such personally significant actions as eating and drinking. In particular, the idea of things ‘not religious, but like them’ are important here, such as discussed Bromley and Shupe’s treatment of quasi-religious corporations like Amway and Herbalife (1990), or Jindra’s examination of Star Trek fans (1994). At the same time, ideas such Luckman’s ‘invisible religion’ (1967), and the ever problematic ‘implicit religion,’ originally floated by Bailey (1998), but which now has a journal in its 12th volume dedicated to its study, evidence the problematic nature of approaching the category ‘religion’ with a rigid Christo-centric model in mind. What this (albeit limited) collection of studies illustrates is the growing recognition of the importance of looking at amorphous, religiously functional elements of society as part of a project of charting the meaning the things with which people fill their everyday lives.

It is with meaning, and what is meaningful, that we can best begin to understand the phenomena of Biodynamics as a cultural product within the contemporary, Westernised social world. Here the writings of Demerath help to unravel meaning as something associated with conceptions of the sacred; particularly his argument that ‘religion’ is not synonymous with ‘sacred’ (Demerath 2000). Further, the preference for this-worldliness, dehierarchization, and pragmatism that Lambert (1999) argued was characteristic of new religious formations, means that any activity that reflects functional, individually affirming meaning to the individual can be considered ‘sacred’. While this too may seem a treacherous path, the point of these theoretical musings is to highlight the importance of meaning in the choices of food consumers. Food (and here I include wine as a ‘food’) is central to identity. Food, food choices, and eating all form part of individual and communal constructions of self and other, as in addition to providing nourishment food also signifies for individuals and communities alike (Fischler 1988). To this end, the Biodynamic appellation carries with it significance. Because of historical associations (see Kirchmann et al. 2008) the label ‘Biodynamic’ freights with it the notion of ‘organic,’ which in turn carries ideas of sustainability, environmental concern, and ethical farming. One of the core arguments of this movement has been a structural critique of the various conventional methods of Western society over the past fifty years; in this case an assertion of inequity and un-sustainability in conventional agricultural systems (Vos 2000). This argument, however, is often linked with discourses of personal health and well-being,

particularly in marketing material (Jones et al. 2001), thus tying the broader social argument back to the immediately personal and individual. For many, it seems, the issue is one of choice, or more precisely the amount of thought one puts into one's food choices. Commentators, such as Sandor Elix Katz (2006), note that many individuals are now looking for what we might call 'soul food,' as much as they are for nutrition. That is, food that makes individuals feel good cognitively as well as gastronomically. Here it appears that modern gastronomy is taking an intellectual and, dare one say it, spiritual turn that looks to food as a source of the sacred in the everyday. That is, a source of meaning and identity.

The importance of Biodynamics to this movement can not be underestimated, and has some significant parallels to new religious formations of the previous one hundred years. It is worth noting that Sutcliffe points to the interwar years in Europe (1918-1939) as "a key period in explaining the roots of 1960s developments in 'new age', and 1980s developments in 'holistic' religion," and that it is therefore "historically determinative of powerful currents in recent Anglophone religious history" (Sutcliffe, 2008: 51). Much the same can be said of Biodynamics. Not only did it emerge in the same period, its underlying philosophies form part of Sutcliffe's taxonomy, with Steiner's Anthroposophical beliefs along with related elements (such as the Theosophical Society for example) becoming significant contributors to such ideals. Further, Kirchman et al (2008) note that the organic agriculture movement can be traced back to the early 20th century, and particularly to Steiner himself, as the first to set out a distinct farming methodology that was a complete enough alternative to accepted forms as to be considered viable. Indeed, it appears that the organic food movement and alternative religious practice often go hand-in-hand (e.g. Rosen 2004; Dubisch 2004), and papers need to be written on just what the nature of this relationship is, and how important Steiner's methods were in demonstrating their possibilities of such practices. Koepf stated that the Biodynamic movement was the pioneer of certification processes for food produced without chemical fertilizers (what today amounts to 'organic' certification) (Koepf 1989: 17). Similar forms of agricultural and dietary practice, such as the Macrobiotic movement formalised by George Oshawa, were developed around the same time (Ohsawa was living in Europe during this period). What makes Biodynamics unique, however, is its explicit beginnings as part of Steiner's holistic plan for human spiritual evolution. While it seems that for

most producers and consumers this has little relevance in its modern forms, it nonetheless makes Biodynamics a compelling cultural product.

Discussions concerning the value of food must engage with cultural, cognitive, and non-rational elements in order to fully situate it as more than simply nutrition, but as a human experience (Delind 2006). It is, finally, with this in mind that we can construct a framework with which to understand Biodynamics as it presents through the wine industry circa 2011. From their food choices modern individuals contribute to the ongoing projects of their identity. Moreover, when wine lovers speak of wine, when they enthuse about the characteristics of a particular wine, and when they cast about for terms with which to describe their experiences of taste and smell, they are speaking the language of the sacred. That is, they are searching for the content with which to articulate what is experienced as meaningful, at least to some degree. In this context, Biodynamics becomes a vehicle for the experiencing and explanation of the esoteric quality of wine. That the methods appear to produce results despite its unscientific nature simply adds to the mysterious nature of wine. As for its Anthroposophical premises, these are, for the most part, simply ignored; what matters is good wine.

To this end, Biodynamic wine typifies the cultural product model put forward by Hirsch as non-material goods that generally serve an expressive and/or aesthetic purposes, rather than clearly utilitarian ones (Hirsch 1972). The extent to which the symbolic elements of Biodynamics are shaped by the systems within which they operate should also be noted. As ‘gatekeepers’ of the cultural product (see Peterson 1994), wine makers and wine critics, as the ‘publishers’ of the ‘artistic material’, evidently think that the consuming public is either not concerned with, or would adversely react to Steiner’s original intent for his agricultural methods. The ‘no bullshit’ position of the winemakers noted above should serve to indicate why the Anthroposophical underpinnings of Biodynamics are being downplayed in favour of the results. Interestingly, however, a recent study found that Biodynamically produced winegrapes had significantly higher brix levels (a measurement of the sugars in the grape juice), and higher total phenols and anthocyanins (contributors to aroma, flavour, and mouthfeel) than non-Biodynamic control groups (Reeve et al. 2005). Positive results such as these will probably do little to dent the status of Biodynamic

methods as cultural products of Steiner and Anthroposophy, albeit with much of their cosmic and esoteric content attenuated.

Conclusion

Steiner wrote exhaustively on the methods he believed could enable the individual to perceive spiritual phenomena. Biodynamic agriculture, as it has come to be known, was a part of that quest. Steiner proposed to the audience present at that now famous series of lectures that humanity needed a change in agriculture methods that would involve ceasing the use of pesticides and inorganic chemicals in favour of utilising ‘cosmic forces.’ These forces, so he argued, would act upon the natural world’s own material to thus be used as organic fertilisers. The celestial rhythms that Steiner saw as affecting plant and animal life on earth were, he argued, key to the spiritual progress of the individual. However, the lack of scientific evidence to support Steiner’s claims concerning etheric forces and spiritual science has seen these aspects of Biodynamic theory be either downplayed or simply dropped by some institutions and producers who apply them. It has also led to sometimes aggressive accusations of fraud and trickery by those unconvinced by the theories. Frustratingly, however, much of the scholarly material on Biodynamic agriculture has been limited to the biological sciences, with little input from humanities and the social sciences as to why people would want to grow and/or consume the produce the methods yield. Future studies that look into the social aspects of Biodynamics will no doubt benefit from applying the production of culture perspective (e.g. Peterson 1994), and particularly frameworks that understand the processes of ‘fads and fashions’ (e.g. Hirsch 1972). However, as a cultural product, the practice of Biodynamic methods and the consumption of its products will best be understood by looking at its situation as an expressive locator of meaning and identity.

Biodynamic agriculture, as it is practiced in the modern wine industry, takes Anthroposophical ideas as its starting point. However, in practice these are not clearly

carried through, resulting in an agricultural practice that for all intents and purposes looks like a quaint homage to a tradition proved outdated by modern science; a form of magic or divination. Indeed, Kirchmann asserted that “bio-dynamic farming must be considered as an occult-religious movement” (Kirchmann 1994: 184), which, of course, would place the practice of the techniques in quite a different frame from that discussed here. Rather, this chapter has taken the position that Steiner’s initial teachings now form the basis for a method of agricultural production that, in the case of the wine industry, is mostly concerned with the expression of *terroir*, rather than the spiritual betterment of wine drinkers. Biodynamic agriculture can thus be said to have been ‘secularised,’ and it is in this guise that it has gained significant popularity in wine industries around the world.

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