

Translations of Rudolf Steiner's Agriculture Course (Koberwitz, 1924): The Seminal Text of Biodynamic Farming and Organic Agriculture

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Abstract

The Agriculture Course of Dr Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) is the seminal text of biodynamic farming and the organic agriculture movement. It has appeared in 16 languages. The Austrian New Age philosopher, Dr Rudolf Steiner, presented his Agriculture Course in the village of Koberwitz, Germany (now Kobierzyce, Poland) in the summer of 1924. The course of eight lectures laid the foundations for the emergence, over the following two decades, of biodynamic farming and organic agriculture. There were 111 attendees at the course at Koberwitz, many were farmers, all were Anthroposophists. The Agriculture Course was presented in German. It was one of the final lecture series that Rudolf Steiner conducted in his lifetime. It was a course of what Rudolf Steiner called "hints", to be put to the test, not prescriptions nor dogmas. The Agriculture Course appeared in print in German in 1926. It was initially available only to members of the Experimental Circle of Anthroposophic Farmers and Gardeners (until some time after WW2). Members of the Experimental Circle agreed to test Rudolf Steiner's ideas and to report the results back to Anthroposophy headquarters at Dornach (on the outskirts of Basel), Switzerland, with the view to the publication of the results. The first translation of the Agriculture Course appeared in English in 1929. That translation was by George Kaufmann (later known as George Adams) who brought to the task his years of masterfully and extemporaneously rendering into English Rudolf Steiner's lectures in German for audiences. There have been at least two other translations into English (in 1938 and 1993). The Agriculture Course has been translated into a further 14 (at least) other languages: French (1943); Swedish (1966); Italian (1973); Danish (1976); Dutch (1977); Spanish (1988); Hebrew (1989); Norwegian (1992); Romanian (1997); Russian (1997); Serbian (2004); Portuguese (2005); Polish (2007); and Esperanto (2009). As organic agriculture continues to increasingly attract consumers, advocates, practitioners, and scholars, interest endures in the seminal text of biodynamics and the organics movement.

Keywords

Anthroposophy, Dornach, Experimental Circle, Ehrenfried Pfeiffer, Kobierzyce

Received: September 22, 2020 / Accepted: October 23, 2020 / Published online: November 6, 2020

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1. Introduction

Dr Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) was in the twilight of his life by the time he delivered his Agriculture Course of eight lectures in the summer of 1924 [1]. Just a few months later (in September, 1924) Rudolf Steiner withdrew completely from public life (to his sick bed), and six months later he was

dead (on 31 March 1925). Rudolf Steiner was in the habit of revisiting and elaborating his themes, but, for agriculture, ill health intervened and there was no such opportunity for repetition or elaboration. The Agriculture Course was Rudolf Steiner's first and final testament to agriculture.

There were 111 attendees at the course in Koberwitz, Germany (now Kobierzyce, Poland) [2]. The Koberwitzers

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(as they called themselves) were devotees of Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy [1]. Rudolf Steiner recalled: "The larger number of those invited by Count and Countess Keyserlingk to meet at this time in their home at Koberwitz were farmers" [3, p.9]. During the Course, Rudolf Steiner founded the Experimental Circle of Anthroposophic Farmers and Gardeners (ECAFG), setting it the task of putting the ideas of the Agriculture Course to the test. About 60 of the Koberwitzers joined the ECAFG, and, thereby, what would become the biodynamics and organics movements were seeded.

The Agriculture Course was subsequently published, first in German (in 1926) [4], and soon after in English (in 1929) [5]. The German text was collated from transcript notes of Course attendees. The English translation was by George Kaufmann (later known as George Adams) (1894-1963). George Kaufmann brought to the task his years of experience of masterfully and extemporaneously rendering into English Rudolf Steiner's lectures in German for audiences in Britain and Europe [6].

Publication enabled the expansion of the ECAFG, beyond the narrow confines of the Koberwitzers. The ECAFG promptly diffused across time and space, attracting new members to the Experimental Circle. The English translation facilitated the Anglo diffusion of the Experimental Circle to Australia, Britain, New Zealand, and the USA [7-10]. Two further translations in English have appeared, in 1938 [11] and 1993 [12].

The Agriculture Course is not a handbook of biodynamics, nor of organic agriculture. It is Rudolf Steiner's thoughts on agriculture of "what there is to be said about agriculture from an anthroposophical point of view" [3, p.9]. The Course is neither prescription nor dogma. Rudolf Steiner described his course as "hints" to be "looked upon as the foundation for experiments and thus gradually brought into a form suitable for publication" [3, p.10] with a view of developing a new agriculture, differentiated from the prevailing thrust of chemical agriculture.

With the oversight of Ehrenfried Pfeiffer (1899-1961), at the Goetheanum at Dornach, and members of the Experimental Circle (ECAFG), the 'Anthroposophic farming' of the Course evolved into 'biodynamic farming' [13, 14]. An English biodynamic farmer, Lord Northbourne (1896-1982), extended Rudolf Steiner's characterisation of 'the farm as an organism', coined the term 'organic farming' and published his manifesto of organic farming versus chemical farming, *Look to the Land*, in 1940 [5, 15-17].

2. Methods

The present paper is informed by the interrogation of public databases including WorldCat.org and Abebooks.com, search engines including Google.com, correspondence with various national and other libraries, access to a private Anthroposophy library, and personal informants for specific translations. No single source, including WorldCat.org (World Catalogue), which is described as "The World's largest library catalogue", is complete. The first publication identified of a particular translation is documented for the purposes of the present paper; it is noted (but not here recorded) that some translations have subsequently been reissued. The convention adopted for the citing of translations in the present paper is to nominate the date as 1924 (the date of the Course) with the date of the publication of the particular translation presented in parentheses, along with the translator (where available).

3. Results

The Agriculture Course of Rudolf Steiner has appeared in at least 16 languages; in the transcribed German [4] plus 15 translations: English (1929) [5]; French (1943) [18]; Swedish (1966) [19]; Italian (1973) [20]; Danish (1976) [21]; Dutch (1977) [22]; Spanish (1988) [23]; Hebrew (1989) [24]; Norwegian (1992) [25]; Romanian (1997) [26]; Russian (1997) [27]; Serbian (2004) [28]; Portuguese (2005) [29]; Polish (2007) [30]; and Esperanto (2009) [31] (Table 1).

Table 1. Translations of the Agriculture Course presented by Rudolf Steiner (in German) at Koberwitz in 1924.

Published	Language	Title	Translator	Publisher	Place
1929	English	Agriculture Course	George Kaufmann	Natural Science Section, Goetheanum	Dornach, Switzerland
1938	English	The Agricultural Course	Marna Pease & Lili Kolisko	Rudolf Steiner Publishing	London, UK
1943	French	Cours aux agriculteurs	Ilse Démarest-Oelschläger	Éditions Montenet	Genève, Switzerland
1966	Swedish	En lantbrukskurs	Magda Henning Andersson & Magda Engqvist	Kosmos	Stockholm, Sweden
1973	Italian	Impulsi scientifico spirituali per il progresso dell'agricoltura	Ivo Beni	Editrice Antroposofica	Milano, Italy
1976	Danish	Bidrag til en fornyelse af landbruget på åndsvidenskabeligt grundlag	na	Antroposofisk Forlag	København, Denmark
1977	Dutch	Geesteswetenschappelijke grondslagen voor een vruchtbare ontwikkeling van de	H. E. Casparét	Nederlandse Vereniging tot bevordering der biologisch-	The Hague, Netherlands

Published	Language	Title	Translator	Publisher	Place
1988	Spanish	landbouw Curso sobre agricultura biológico-dinámica	na	dynamische landbouwmethode Editorial Rudolf Steiner S L	Madrid, Spain
1989	Hebrew	הקלאות ביו-דינמית	Tomer Rosen-Grace	הוצאת המרכז ללימודים אנתרופוסופיים	Israel
1992	Norwegian	Landbrukskurset	na	Antropos	Oslo, Norway
1993	English	Spiritual foundations for the renewal of agriculture:	Catherine Creeger	Bio-Dynamic Farming & Gardening Association	Kimberton, USA
1997	Romanian	Bazele spiritual-științifice pentru prosperarea agriculturii curs de agricultură	Delia Popescu	Editura Triade SRL	Cluj-Napoca, Romania
1997	Russian	Сельскохозяйственный Курс	Z. M. Zhemchuzhnikova, Demidov & Banzeluk	Твер-дый пе-ре-плет [Spiritual Knowledge]	Kaluga, Russia
2004	Serbian	Poljoprivredni kurs Koberwitz, 1924	Anica Milović	S. Nikolić	Zrenjanin, Serbia
2005	Portugese	Fundamentos da agricultura biodinâmica	Gerard Bannwart	Antroposófica	São Paulo, Brazil
2007	Polish	Kurs Rolniczy	Dieter J. Durich	Zielone Świątki	Bielsko-Biała, Poland
2009	Esperanto	Kurso agrikultura	Willy Nüesch	Eldonita de la tradukinto	Berno, Czech Republic

4. Discussion

The publication of the Agriculture Course enabled the lectures to have a life beyond the 111 Koberwitzers of 1924. The publication extended the reach of the “hints” across time and space. The translations further extended the reach across language barriers. The text was initially only available to members of the Experimental Circle (the ECAFG) where a prerequisite was to be a member of the Anthroposophy Society. Copies issued to members of the ECAFG (whether in German or English) were individually numbered, and each recipient signed a confidentiality agreement and nominated where they were to test the ideas of the course [32]. Rudolf Steiner’s instructions at Koberwitz were to put his “hints” to the test and publish the results of what worked. That injunction was arguably satisfied with the publication of Ehrenfried Pfeiffer’s book *Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening* in 1938 [13].

5. Conclusion

The Agriculture Course of Rudolf Steiner is the seminal text of what subsequently developed into the biodynamics and organics movements. As such, the Agriculture Course has a secure and enduring place in the canon of clean and green food and fibre production, and in the history of the biodynamics and organics movements [33]. However the Agriculture Course is not a manual nor a manifesto and not a prescriptive document. It was the ECAFG that was tasked with developing tested and proven practices, with the Agriculture Course as a starting point.

Rudolf Steiner is reported as stating: “The most important thing is to make the benefits of our agricultural preparations available to the largest possible areas over the entire earth, so that the earth may be healed and the nutritive quality of its produce improved in every respect. That should be our first

objective.” [34, p.120]. Continuing biodynamics publications and translations serve this intent.

Translations in languages that use other than Latin script are not well represented in the present study and it seems likely that some translations may have been overlooked in the present account. The author welcomes the identification of omissions and additions.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Pawel Bietkowski, Demeter-Poland, for sending a copy of the Polish translation of the Agriculture Course. Thank you to the National Library of Russia, the National Library of China, and the National Library of Israel for their kind assistance.

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