

## **Economic Life in the Light of the Folk Souls - Rudolf Steiner's Commitment to World Peace**

*A report of the 9th Annual Meeting of the Economics Conference at L'Aubier, Neuchâtel, Switzerland, 16–19 September 2010. The 2011 meeting of the Economics Conference will again take place in L'Aubier (from 28<sup>th</sup> September to 1<sup>st</sup> October). The theme will be the role of Christian Rosenkreutz in economic life.*

### **Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and Rudolf Steiner**

On May 5<sup>th</sup> 1910 Theodore Roosevelt gave his Nobel acceptance speech in which he outlined his proposal for how the cause of international peace could be advanced through Treaties, World Courts and International Policing Organisations. It is upon this vision of world development with its intellectually appealing ideals, that today's arrangements have been established.

A month later in Oslo, Rudolf Steiner gave his lecture series on the Mission of the Folk Souls which offers a very different view of how international relations can be understood. Whereas the Rooseveltian approach is characterised by fixity and abstraction, Steiner offers a dynamic approach based on the reality of beings whose existence is interwoven with the peoples of the earth.

The same contrast can be found 8 years later when Steiner explicitly formulates his idea of the threefold nature of social life in contrast to Woodrow Wilson's programme of 14 points. Though Steiner warned of the dangers that would ensue for humanity if a new social organisation were built on such a thin intellectual foundation as Wilsonism, nevertheless according to Walter Mead<sup>1</sup>: 'Wilson's principles ... still guide European politics today: self-determination, democratic government, collective security, international law, and a league of nations. ... his vision and his diplomacy ... set the tone for the twentieth century. France, Germany, Italy, and Britain ... today conduct [their] European policy along Wilsonian lines.'

The above quotation illustrates how completely the Versailles Treaty has shaped the evolving contour of human affairs. But to what extent have the premises upon which the post-war settlement was founded been challenged – indeed what other socio-political construct might provide a basis for future arrangements? Has the time now come to revisit and reconceive the First World War settlement along the lines envisaged by Rudolf Steiner?

The aim of the 9<sup>th</sup> annual Economics Conference meeting was to seek to understand better the links made by Steiner between the peoples of the earth and spiritual beings in order to see how this might lead to a fluid and evolving political context.

### **Rudolf Steiner's Commitment to World Peace – 1910-2010**

Marc Desales introduced the theme of the conference by linking back to the previous meeting at which the focus had been on true prices. He described how prices are

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<sup>1</sup> in *'Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World'* 2002: 9

mediated through currencies and these contain a national element which relate to the folk-soul element. If this is not properly understood it gives rise to geo-political struggle in place of true international relations.

Desaules contrasted Roosevelt's ideas which propose territorial fixity and the underlying threat of force with Steiner's idea of folk souls as archangelic beings who are linked to certain areas of landscape. Further elaborations of the picture Steiner presents involve spirits of language and time spirits which all interrelate to give national characteristics. Desaules elaborated on how one might form a link to this realm in our relation to the Archangeloī and the Archai. It became clear that much linguistic confusion arises in our failure to distinguish categorically between a term which references the land (such as England), a term that references the political entity (such as the United Kingdom) and a term that references the culture or being of the people (such as the British), into this confusion comes the frequent synonymy of land, political entity, people and language (such as France / French or Germany / German). This single use of a term reinforces the idea of the nation-state, in cases such as Switzerland one is at least forced to differentiate between language and political identity. It is the unitary nation-state with which we are confronted today at every turn, if we could but differentiate in the way Steiner proposes we might find ourselves better oriented and inwardly independent.

### **Rudolf Steiner's Perception of the West, Central Europe, the Mission of Switzerland and the Role of England**

Much of the conference was devoted to exploring the various pronouncements made by Steiner in link to the unfolding of his social impulse. Various references to the West and Central Europe were unpacked in greater detail by Christopher Houghton Budd and Christian Bosse, as too was the suggestion that the threefolding impulse **had not** taken root in the countries of central Europe, (and **could not** in the West or the East) but might still happen in Switzerland if allowed to develop freely. Switzerland was seen by Steiner as a place where the rights life still had something of a virgin quality, untouched by Romanism. Developing this rights life based not on outer law but recognition of the dignity of others would be a task for Switzerland: this would also make unnecessary the rather abstract notion of human rights that has justified the appearance of various international institutions.

The 100 years that have passed since Steiner's Oslo lectures have given ample evidence of the consequence of the rather static (though perhaps intellectually idealistic) approach he cautioned against. The tendency toward legalism and international political enforcement has found expression in the United Nations and the European Union – organisations that represent the direct counter-example to the kind of thing that Steiner had in mind. Indeed the latter may be seen in light of his warning about attempts to revive the Holy Roman Empire as a way of suppressing the anthroposophical impulse. Interestingly, Switzerland, which found its identity against the backdrop of the Habsburg domination of Europe, has stayed out of the EU.

A special focus was given by Dr. Houghton Budd to the work of John Maynard Keynes and his relevance as an Englishman who combined poetic turns of phrase with cool numerical calculation. Keynes, who had been present at the 1919 Versailles

Treaty, was referred to by Steiner on several occasions as a significant economic thinker. One characteristic of Keynes thought, which expresses itself later in his 1940s proposal for an International Clearing Union, is his world-embracing vision, already apparent after the first world war when he sought to warn the British of the negative economic impact of too narrow and nationalistic a point of view. It is clear that the British, and specifically the English, have a particular link to economics, but this can only express itself in a true way when it unfolds in a cosmopolitan spirit.

### **The Task of the General Anthroposophical Society**

Perhaps the most striking outcome of the meeting was the insight that the GAS can act as a platform for the conscious meeting of folk spirits through their representatives in the Anthroposophical Society. The Societies need to be understood in correspondence with a spiritual reality (such as Great Britain) rather than a political construct (the United Kingdom). Were international relations to have this character, rather than that of political wrangling, their effect might be more inspiring. Though such modest gatherings as ours in the Economics Conference may appear to count for nothing, they offer the context for researching and rehearsing an understanding which, if generalised would lead us into a very different landscape. We would come out of an illusory intellectual world of nation-states with fixed boundaries, conceived in the abstract as eternal; then, having reconceived the world, we could act from the underlying spiritual realities upon which our existence is grounded.

Anthroposophists, knowing the errors upon which current arrangements are based, should not allow themselves to be seduced into thinking ‘pragmatically’ that no other reality is possible when the geo-political world by which they are confronted is itself but a shadow. The reality which Rudolf Steiner points to is that of the spiritual beings to whom we are linked individually, in national communities and as humanity.