

An Interview with Peter Staudenmaier by [Michael Barker](#)

(Swans - December 3, 2012) [Peter Staudenmaier](#) is a professor of modern German history at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He is the coauthor (with [Janet Biehl](#)) of *Ecofascism: Lessons from the German Experience* (AK Press 1995). In 2010 he was awarded a Ph.D. from Cornell University for a thesis titled "Between Occultism and Fascism: Anthroposophy and the Politics of Race and Nation in Germany and Italy, 1900-1945." This interview was carried out by e-mail in June 2012.

Michael Barker (MB): Why did you choose to undertake your doctoral studies, and how did you become interested in studying anthroposophy?

Peter Staudenmaier (PS): I was an independent scholar and activist for many years, working outside of the academy, and one of my first longer publications was a book on right-wing ecology co-authored with my colleague Janet Biehl (Janet Biehl and Peter Staudenmaier, *Ecofascism: Lessons from the German Experience*, AK Press 1995; second edition: *Ecofascism Revisited*, New Compass Press 2011). My chapter in that book explored the history of the so-called 'green wing' of the Nazi movement and the various environmental aspects of National Socialism. Part of that history involves Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy; the anthroposophist version of organic farming, known as biodynamic agriculture, played an important role for the green faction of the Nazis. Anthroposophy is a fairly prominent movement in parts of Europe, and a few years after the *Ecofascism* book came out, I was asked by a European journal to write an article specifically about the connections between anthroposophy and the green wing of Nazism. Out of that article, the rest of my research on anthroposophy developed over the course of a decade.

My decision to start doctoral studies and embark on an academic career was a complex process. I had deliberately avoided an academic path for a long time, and I still think some of the best scholarship being done today comes from non-university based thinkers and independent intellectuals. I taught for years at the Institute for Social Ecology in Vermont, and eventually realized that if I wanted to continue teaching as part of my vocation, I would need to become a professional historian. An additional factor involved the increasingly intricate and extensive research I was working on, which can be difficult to pursue in a serious way without the support of academic institutions. I write on a lot of different topics, and the anthroposophy project seemed particularly well-suited to my doctoral work. After a year in the archives in Germany and Italy, I had more than enough material for a thorough dissertation on the history of anthroposophy under Nazism and Fascism. I am currently revising the dissertation into a book.

MB: As a result of publishing your work did you come across any opposition from the academic and/or anthroposophical community? Could you please explain how you responded to such criticism?

PS: Any outside scholar who studies anthroposophy encounters strong opposition from parts of the anthroposophist movement. A large part of the reason why I continued researching anthroposophy's history had to do with this sort of opposition; I initially thought the article I was asked to write back in 1999 would be a one-time piece, and then I'd return to other topics. But the article provoked such an indignant response among anthroposophists that I went back to the sources to see if I had missed something, and the further I dug into this history the more I found. Anthroposophists routinely claim that scholars who examine their movement have distorted Steiner's ideas and misrepresented his teachings and falsified his true message and so forth; this is a common reaction among esoteric groups, who often believe they have special access to higher forms of knowledge and react strongly against scholarly standards of critical inquiry. The same sort of opposition I face is even more intense in the case of my German colleague Helmut Zander, the foremost historian of anthroposophy. Many of

Steiner's followers simply don't like seeing their movement and worldview subjected to external scrutiny.

I am a committed supporter of open and critical public discussion of historical research, and in my view it is a bad idea to leave the details of this sort of research to professional historians alone. In that sense, anthroposophist opposition to scholarly examination offers a welcome opportunity for public controversy and debate, even if few anthroposophists are willing to engage in public discussion of their movement. My responses to anthroposophical complaints about my research try to move this process forward ever so slightly. I usually start by explaining why it is important to try to understand Steiner's teachings in their historical context and why anthroposophists so frequently misunderstand their own textual sources or are even unaware of these sources. Many of my replies to anthroposophists involve dispelling longstanding myths about the history of anthroposophy, myths which have become firmly established within the anthroposophical milieu and form a significant obstacle to anthroposophist understanding of their own past.

MB: Why do you think that written criticisms of anthroposophy are so rare?

PS: I wouldn't say they are rare; there is a very extensive critical literature in German, for example. What is relatively rare is serious scholarly engagement with esoteric groups like anthroposophy, which have long been considered marginal and not worth intensive study. That is beginning to change; there is increasing attention to occult and esoteric topics in the academic world today and some superb scholarship has appeared on various aspects of this previously neglected history. But it can be genuinely difficult for scholars in any discipline to engage with material like this; Steiner's works often defy interpretation, and the internal discourse among his followers can be effectively incomprehensible. In much of the English-speaking world, anthroposophy is still not very well known; aside from the biodynamic milieu, the most likely way for people interested in alternative cultural themes to encounter anthroposophist ideas and practices is through Waldorf schools, and Waldorf spokespeople frequently fail to provide adequate historical background, often enough because they are unaware of it themselves.

MB: You note that "anthroposophy has become renowned in different parts of the world for its efforts on behalf of alternative education, holistic health care, organic farming and natural foods, environmental consciousness, and innovative forms of spiritual expression, among other causes." Could you highlight some of the most significant groups or individuals that illustrate this trend?

PS: Anthroposophists are involved in all sorts of activities along these lines, from organic farming to alternative education to natural medicine to New Age spirituality. Steiner is a readily recognizable figure in those fields, and many of his followers have contributed extensively to the growth of such trends. Waldorf schools are one of the most popular forms of alternative education today, and biodynamics occupies a high-profile position within much of the organic movement. Anybody interested in esoteric spiritual teachings will come across Steiner's ideas sooner or later. In Germany, anthroposophical medicine is a very well established form of holistic health care, while the Demeter brand of biodynamic products is a highly visible part of the organic food scene. And all sorts of people use Weleda products, another anthroposophist enterprise. Anthroposophy has additionally been a significant influence on prominent cultural figures like Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Saul Bellow, and Joseph Beuys. The German Greens have also provided a welcoming home for many anthroposophists, and several of the leading founders of the Greens were anthroposophists.

MB: I get the sense that spiritual practices like theosophy and anthroposophy are not so popular among the working class; what are your thoughts on this? (This of course is not always the case and I would be particularly interested in your take on the current success of the Rerikh movement in Russia.)

PS: Theosophy and anthroposophy have traditionally drawn heavily on a bourgeois clientele; in fact in its early years, Steiner's movement featured a conspicuously high proportion of aristocrats. Steiner did try to make inroads with working class audiences in the wake of World War One, with little success. In my view, this dynamic has more to do with the general parameters of the 'alternative' cultural milieu than with anthroposophy in particular; for better or worse, it isn't sociologically surprising that most Waldorf pupils come from comparatively well-off families, for instance. There have always been working class alternatives to this middle class 'alternative' scene, though they are often not as well known and not as financially successful. But for the most part, esoteric movements tend to attract a fairly consistent demographic segment. I don't know much about the Rerikh movement in Russia, and I'm not sure its class profile is all that different; Roerich himself did not come from working class origins. In the German context, there is a lengthy history of middle class reform movements, often referred to as 'life reform' currents, which formed a central part of the matrix out of which anthroposophy emerged. In a sense, anthroposophy is a hybrid of this sort of bourgeois reform tendency and esoteric spirituality, and that is a big part of what makes it appealing to many people today, as well as what makes it interesting historically.

MB: Finally, if you had to recommend a short list of books to someone who wanted to learn more about the history of esoteric groups, what would they be?

PS: Here's a list of useful sources on the history of esotericism:

James Webb, *The Occult Establishment* (La Salle: Open Court, 1976).

James Webb, *The Occult Underground* (La Salle: Open Court, 1974).

Corinna Treitel, *A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

Thomas Laqueur, "Why the Margins Matter: Occultism and the Making of Modernity," *Modern Intellectual History*, 3 (2006), pp.111-35.

Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

David Allen Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment: Occultism and Politics in Modern France* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005).

Bernice Rosenthal, ed., *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

Wouter Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Wouter Hanegraaff, ed., *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

Arthur Versluis, ed., *Esotericism, Religion, and Politics* (North American Academic Press, 2012).

Kocku von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge* (London: Equinox, 2005).

Bruce Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived: A History of the Theosophical Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun: Aryan Cults, Esoteric Nazism and the Politics of Identity* (New York University Press, 2002).

Andreas Kilcher, ed., *Constructing Tradition: Means and Myths of Transmission in Western Esotericism* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

Olav Hammer, "Schism and consolidation: The case of the theosophical movement" in James Lewis and Sarah Lewis, eds., *Sacred Schisms: How Religions Divide* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp.196-217.

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