



The Form and Work of the Economics Conference of the Goetheanum

A considered, albeit personal view

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Revised in Canterbury Cathedral at Epiphany 2022, the following notes were the basis of a talk given at the 3rd Latin American Congress of the Economics Conference of the Goetheanum, held in Sao Paulo, Brazil in October 2019.

Why does the work of the Economics Conference of the Goetheanum need describing? Because there is no agreed image of what Rudolf Steiner had in mind regarding sections and especially the emancipated nature of economics in our time.¹

I'll begin by recreating the 'grid' drawing from the Christmas Conference, 27 December 1923,² which shows the sections of the School of Spiritual Science horizontally and its three classes vertically. It is open upwards to the heavens and also downwards through the Anthroposophical Society to human spiritual life generally.

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I start with the thought, from the Christmas Conference, that spiritual science displaces natural science as the basis of civilisation, via professional practical work.

The condition for membership of a section is that one enters one's field of activity on an educated and professional basis, and does one's best to inform one's work with what one has been able to glean from a true scientific understanding of its problems, history and methodologies.

Membership of a section, however, presupposes membership of the School of Spiritual Science (via the First Class in the Section for General Anthroposophy), for which the only condition is that one acts as a 'representant' of anthroposophy.³ One has, of course, to attend to one's inner life and be mindful of one's colleagues, but those are not primary conditions.

There were initially eight sections (see list below) with all the 'leaders'⁴ initially chosen by Rudolf Steiner, on the grounds of their standing, not only as earnestly striving anthroposophists, but also some degree of public recognition in their field. So that a section exists to the extent that there is such a person. It cannot be a lay affair. A section does not exist in the abstract. It can be that there is no one with the karma of a leader, so a section should not be created or kept alive for the sake of it. For then it becomes an

¹ See, for example, *The Emancipation of the Economic Process from the Personal Element*, 1 February 1919 (CW 188).

² *The Christmas Conference for the Foundation of the General Anthroposophical Society*. Anthroposophic Press, New York 1990, p. 118 and p. XVIII (CW 260).

See also 'The Mission of the Anthroposophical Society' in *Towards Christmas 2023*. Search aeBookstore.com.

³ See talk by Marc Desaulles, give in London in May 2014, available here:

https://economics.goetheanum.org/fileadmin/economics/Towards_2023/EC_MD_The_Challenges_of_Christmas_1923.pdf

⁴ Rather than the leader of a nation, such as a president, or a leader in the sense of managerial strategies or American business practices, 'leader' is meant here in the sense of a leader, not even conductor, of an orchestra, the one who sounds a note that hopefully everyone can resonate with.

earthly office, like a department in a conventional university, the corollary of which readily becomes the expectation of a salary.

The challenge to a leader is to represent a broad church, both karmically and in terms of perspectives. As in any profession, members of a section are not slave to a dogma, but they are, or should be, all looking in the same direction, though without falling into the trap of relativism. The role of a leader is to coordinate, to synthesise, but also to give direction based on what his or her position in the midst of everything suggests is needed. This is then communicated to the section's members as a whole, who can corroborate it or otherwise – and so to build a shared understanding (but not a dogma or 'party line').

A section has also to represent leading edge, world-class research in its field; often in-field rather than academic in the abstract sense. But it also has to be scholarly; it needs to contribute to the 'literature', not live isolated from the rest of its professional realm.

When they exist, the sections, should be part of and so a reflection of their field. In my view, they should also have an objective content and some shared meditative basis, ideally given by Steiner but directly on topic. There was no verse given for economists, however, so here we have a challenge, even a mystery.

Today, there are 11 sections, the first eight being those originally announced in this sequence on 28 December 1923:

General Anthroposophy (Rudolf Steiner)
Pedagogical (Rudolf Steiner)
Belles Lettres (Arts and Humanities) (Albert Steffen)
Spoken Arts, Music and Eurythmy (Marie Steiner)
Natural Sciences (Guenther Wachsmuth)
Medical (Ita Wegman)
Plastic (Sculptural) Arts (Edith Maryon)
Mathematics and Astronomy (Elisabeth Vreede)

Agriculture
Social Science(s)⁵
Spiritual Striving of Youth

There is no section as such for economics because economics is thought to belong in the Social Sciences Section. To my mind this does not make historical sense because economics is everywhere a social science apart, and is so for clear and specific reasons.⁶

By, in this way, not reflecting the evolution of economics in our own movement we remain to one side of general cultural development, and neither economics nor economic life in general can then be touched by spiritual science. We risk remaining with our private, often strange vocabulary, unaware of subtle developments because we choose to develop an 'alternative' view rather than nuance or even metamorphose the 'mainstream', seemingly forgetting that for Rudolf Steiner the role of spiritual science is not to side step or set up a rival to materialism, but to lead humanity out of that vale of tears. Spiritual science is not antithetical to natural science, but it does challenge the idea that natural

⁵ Made plural by Paul Mackay when he took on the leadership.

⁶ See Footnote 2. Also, Alon Kadish's *History, Economists and Economic History* (Routledge 2010) provides an informed account of this development.

science is a synonym for science as such, when in reality it is science applied to the sense-perceptible world (albeit often badly, i.e. unscientifically).

The Economics Conference is a surrogate or ‘would-be’ section. It is embedded in the Social Sciences Section in deference to the ‘wrong’ image many people have today of the place and task of economics. It works as a standing conference of professional colleagues, active in modern economic life in varying ways, who come together to deliberate and share their experiences at the ‘coalface’. But they share in building a common substance that also belongs to the world – above all, accounting and the financial literacy linked to that.

Through this activity especially, one remains concretely connected to all the economic issues of the day because it is the karma of economics to have ignored accounting in the 19th century and gone down a path of separation, predicating itself on mathematics and ‘cycles’ theory instead. Its reconnection will only be possible when it grounds itself in accounting. Hence, at the end of his 14 economics lectures⁷ Steiner turns his attention precisely to this aspect – money as bookkeeping. When ‘associative economics’ is formally understood, it is this that makes it the next step on from today’s market economics.

Fine-tuning our understanding of accounting, then tracking its consequences not only for economics as a discipline and a science, but for the effects economics can then have in and on wider economic life – this has become a principal task and focus of the Economics Conference.⁸

It is, however, a matter of karmic sadness that this work, along with those who carry it out, is largely unknown and often actively ignored within the anthroposophical movement, even though the movement is often beset by economic and financial difficulties, those of the Anthroposophical Society included. It is something of a disconnect that, while the Goetheanum struggles to balance its books, inside its very walls members of the School of Spiritual Science who are all either economists, auditors or entrepreneurs, are actively reviewing the International Accounting Standards, for example, with a view to modifying them on the basis that money is bookkeeping and what follows from that insight on the part of Rudolf Steiner, especially perhaps as regards the Society’s own money flows. It is also perplexing that this work is embedded in the world at large, in scholarly papers, doctoral dissertations and policy debates, but largely unknown within the anthroposophical movement, where banking, not-for-profit finance and management consultancy all give the, to me untoward, impression of being based on Steiner’s economic and monetary ideas. Not to mention the advocacy by many anthroposophists of basic income, ‘full money’, ‘B’ corporations, and so on, ideas whose link to the work of Rudolf Steiner is tenuous at best, and often not attested to by their, typically non-anthroposophical, originators.

⁷ *Economics – The world as one economy*. Rudolf Steiner, New Economy Publications, Canterbury, England 2014 [1996/1922]. (GA 340) Search aebookstore.com.

⁸ See [Economics Conference / Financial Literacy](#) and the affiliated website, www.associative-financial-literacy.com

Another important aspect of the work of the Economics Conference is its focus on the I and the nature of initiation in our times. We do not spend time discussing directly the importance of one's inner life or the need to be mindful of colleagues when being proactive in the world, because that is like telling someone to look in the mirror or mind the kerbs when driving. It is also not something one can judge in others; whereas one can judge the truth, correctness, viability, etc., of *one's own* understanding of a balance sheet, for example. Or of monetary policy.

What we spend time on is the evolution of the process of initiation and the fact that modern spiritual life is necessarily economic in character. That means the I has itself to take hold of economic life if it would find itself; that the company or corporation is in the first place a form of temple; and that finance in the sense of accounting is Guardian-like.⁹

In other words, economic life is a field of initiation. To enter it, which one does perforce of being born today, is to place oneself at the threshold, from the other side of which alone can come the ideas that belong to the future. By such yardsticks one should be able to measure any proposal in the field of economics today – and there are many. But which of them is predicated on the awakened I?

Lastly, much is made by some about spiritual science being based on a special methodology. Beyond meditative practices, however, it is not clear to me what that special methodology is. In my experience, the epistemology of both spiritual science and economics, not to mention the social sciences more generally, is identical insofar as all observe, or purport to observe, supersensible phenomena.¹⁰ For me, therefore, when conducting research in economics two main watchwords suffice:

- i) in any micro/specific case, identify its implied macro/general policy; and vice versa.
- ii) specify the precise aspect of Rudolf Steiner's work that one's cases and ideas are examples of or purport to explicate or elaborate further.

⁹ These are themes from *Step into Another World! – Economic Life as a Medium for Modern Initiation*. Search aeBookstore.com.

¹⁰ I elaborate on this in *Concerning Spiritual Scientific Research* and *On Research and the Economics Conference* viewable here: <https://economics.goetheanum.org/research/convenors-considerations>