



<http://www.diva-portal.org>

This is the published version of a paper published in *Correspondences. Online Journal for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Arvidsson, S. (2014)

[review of] Peter Staudenmaier. *Between Occultism and Nazism: Anthroposophy and the Politics of Race in the Fascist Era*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014. vii + 412 pp.

ISBN:9789004264076. €149.00 / \$193.00.

Correspondences. Online Journal for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism, 2(2): 219-222

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:lnu:diva-36609>

Peter Staudenmaier. *Between Occultism and Nazism: Anthroposophy and the Politics of Race in the Fascist Era*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014. vii + 412 pp. ISBN: 9789004264076. €149.00 / \$193.00.

The American historian Peter Staudenmaier has written one of the most thoroughly researched books I have laid my hands on in recent years. His delving into the deep archives is as impressive as his mastery of the scholarly literature. The subject of his outstanding *Between Occultism and Nazism: Anthroposophy and the Politics of Race in the Fascist Era* (Brill, 2014) concerns the controversial ways in which the anthroposophical movement navigated, survived and negotiated its position in the Third Reich and fascist Italy. There are several important lessons to be learned from Staudenmaier's fascinating, detailed and persuasive study.

Staudenmaier pays special attention to the use of the concept of race in the writings of Rudolf Steiner and other prominent German anthroposophists during the 1930s and 40s. The first lesson to be learned from this book is the striking overlap between the anthroposophical and National Socialist versions of the concept of race. Staudenmaier proves this convincingly by doing a close reading of some of Steiner's works (of the originally published texts, *nota bene*, and not of the censored editions published after the fall of the Reich). For me, Staudenmaier's descriptive story reveals, more clearly than before, to what a large extent anthroposophy was theosophy distorted by German chauvinism. The ease by which many German and Austrian anthroposophists accepted the *Blut-und-Boden* teachings, the racism, and the militant nationalism of the NSDAP regime corroborates this fact.

A critical remark regarding Staudenmaier's focus on "race" would be that he refrains from providing a comprehensive portrait of Steiner's esoteric ideas and worldview. Such a picture, even one constructed quickly with broad strokes, would give the reader an idea of the relative importance of the notion of race for Steiner's thinking, and it would also give the reader a hint about what other issues the anthroposophical and the Nazi imaginations could attract or repel. Chapter 4, bearing the subtitle "Ideological affinities between anthroposophy and Nazism," does not really give us this in any substantial way. Furthermore, there is something slightly inconsistent between Staudenmaier's claim that anthroposophy was over time targeted by the Nazis as an "ideological enemy" not because of dissimilarities but because of "ideological proximity," and the observation that while many anthroposophists in Germany cherished the awakening of a New Reich, others denounced it as a form of materialism (145, 245).

In contrast to what today's anthroposophists often claim, it was, according to the author, therefore not ideological conflicts that made the Nazi regime ban anthroposophy on November 15, 1935, or start persecutions on June 9, 1941. The background to 1941's *Aktion gegen Gebietslehren und sogenannte Geheimgewissenshaft* ("Campaign against occult doctrines and so called occult sciences"), with its closing down of anthroposophical institutions and imprisoning of leading anthroposophists, is outlined by Staudenmaier as basically a search by the Sicherheitsdienst (SD) for a mission and purpose as an institution. The opportunity to strike out at anthroposophy along with many other esoteric groups came with the peculiar, and for the Nazi regime extremely embarrassing, secret voyage to Scotland made by Rudolf Hess, Hitler's deputy. This astonishing miscalculation by Hess, which led to his imprisonment in the UK, removed from the Nazi apparatus the strongest support for "alternative" ideas and practices and thus opened things up for the anti-occultist wing with its leading Nazis such as the SD-führer Reinhard Heydrich, Martin Bormann and Joseph Goebbels.

Staudenmaier proves repeatedly how leading persons in the anthroposophical movement were sympathizers or members of the NSDAP, or worked within its organisations. He emphasises that anthroposophy lacked doctrines or ethical principles that could set it in direct opposition to the ruthless Nazi rule. The major deviation between the two German movements detected in *Between Occultism and Nazism* concerns the word "spiritual" (translated from *geistig* and/or *seelisch*) as a way to chisel out a "spiritual racism" from Nazi "materialistic racism." But what did this concept mean? Is not race by definition something bodily? Unfortunately, Staudenmaier never tries to explain this anthroposophical, and general esoteric, use of "spiritual racism." Was this concept merely the outcome of a more or less empty elitist rhetoric, or did it actually have some kind of cognitive coherence? Learning from Steiner's pen that pregnant European women should avoid reading "Negro novels" since their babies might then turn into mulattos, (51) one doubts Steiner's will to think these matters through clearly.

One question that might be asked concerning the popularity of racist ideas in esoteric circles during what Staudenmaier calls "the modern occult revival," that is the period from the 1870s up until the Second World War – he even talks about occultism as a "mass phenomenon" in Germany in the 1930s, a statement I consider to be an exaggeration – is whether there exists a special affinity between racism and occultism. In *Alkemi, romantik och rasvetenskap: om en vetenskaplig tradition* ("Alchemy, romanticism, and race science: About a sci-

entific tradition”) from 1994, the Swedish historian of ideas Hertha Hansson identifies an epistemological tradition of “empirical idealism.” Hansson’s examples of this tradition are alchemy, romantic *Naturphilosophie* and modern physical anthropology. According to her, people within these traditions tried to move from observable empirical facts to the identification of spiritual (ideal) qualities. Not actually working within the field of esotericism studies myself, I might have missed scholarly discussions along Hansson’s lines; in that case, I look forward to taking part of them in the future.¹ I also believe this to be an important path to follow because the study of esotericism often tends to isolate itself from the study of modern religion and culture in general; anthroposophy is of course the perfect bridge between the obscure world of occultism and the overarching intellectual and cultural history.

At any rate, a significant consequence of the hostility from certain influential members of the NSDAP and a number of institutions in the Third Reich toward the Anthroposophical Society in Germany, the anthroposophical Christian Community and other related ideological or *Weltanschauung* organisations was the process whereby the anthroposophical movement downplayed its ideological, religious or theological side and instead cultivated its practical side: “When faced with unremitting opposition from the anti-occult Nazis, anthroposophists did not retreat into the private world of spiritual ideas but focused instead on practical efforts, demonstrating the worth of Waldorf schools, anthroposophical medicine, and biodynamic agriculture for the New Germany.” (144)

The typical – and when it comes to survival in a non-anthroposophical environment, highly successful – profile of the movement is thus a result of a forced reorientation during the Third Reich. Outsiders today consequently identify anthroposophy most notably with Waldorf schools, biodynamic farming and alternative health products, not with teachings about Aryan root races and warnings against degenerating Ahrimanic influences. The contemporary persona of anthroposophy as an internationalist, humanistic and even “female” movement that experiments with different crops and “eurythmic” dances actually brings anthroposophy back closer to (the persona of) the Theo-

¹ The editor kindly reminds me that Wouter Hanegraaff’s *New Age Religion: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1996) emphasises the importance of *Naturphilosophie* for the rise of modern esotericism, and furthermore informs me that this track is followed for the case of Steiner in Helmut Zander, *Anthroposophie in Deutschland: Theosophische Weltanschauung und gesellschaftliche Praxis, 1884–1945*, 2 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007) and in Egil Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse, 1900–1939* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

sophical Society that Steiner and his allies disparaged and broke away from to craft a purely Western mysticism on German soil.

The last two chapters in Staudenmaier's book concern the destiny of anthroposophy in fascist Italy. As strongly researched as the chapters on the German situation, these chapters tend, however, to become all too focused on certain crucial individuals (among them Julius Evola, popular today among brown- or black-shirtish young intellectuals) and their engagement with fascism. Something about the overall view of how Italian anthroposophy in general related to fascist ideas and ethics is absent. Except for minor critical comments such as the above, Staudenmaier's *Between Occultism and Nazism* is a splendid, well-argued and meticulous contribution to the study of one of the most important of the new religious movements of modern Europe.

Stefan Arvidsson