

Book Review

Correspondences 7, no. 2 (2019): 1-5

Dan McKanan. *Eco-Alchemy: Anthroposophy and the History and Future of Environmentalism*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018. xvi + 289 pp. ISBN: 9780520290068. \$29.95/£24.00.

When I began putting applications together for my undergraduate degree many years ago, I had a secret motivation for applying to the Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. Olympia was the home of Wolves in the Throne Room, a heavy metal group that I admired very much. The members of the band lived together on an organic farm in Olympia called Calliope, where they practiced the techniques of biodynamic agriculture derived from the work of Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925). As an eighteen-year-old, I envisioned apprenticing myself to the members of Wolves in the Throne Room not only to learn the mysteries of heavy metal, but to better understand the life-forces contained in a seed. As chance had it, I did not end up attending Evergreen or joining a group of Anthroposophist farmer-metalheads, but this personal anecdote is suggestive of the unusual popularity and influence that the philosophy of Steiner has enjoyed since his death in 1925. The depth and breadth of his influence on environmentalism generally are the subject of Dan McKanan’s excellent new book, *Eco-Alchemy: Anthroposophy and the History and Future of Environmentalism*.

McKanan weaves a deft narrative of the interrelation between two complex and unwieldy cultural formations: the environmental movement, “a vast ecosystem” that is hardly reducible to any single set of political concerns, religious beliefs, or cultural values; and anthroposophy, the philosophy and teachings of Rudolf Steiner. Anthroposophy and environmentalism are both massively distributed cultural formations whose interrelation is so complex that it is not always clear where one has influenced the other. McKanan has done a tremendous service for the study of esotericism and the history of environmentalism by untangling this dense web of relations, and the result is the first full scholarly examination of anthroposophy’s role in the history of environmentalism.

In the introduction, McKanan lays out his methods, some of the theoretical implications of his work for the study of religion and ecology, and some justification for the thesis of the book, that “one cannot fully understand the environmental movement today without taking into account anthroposophy’s multifaceted contributions” (xv). Ultimately, in accounting for his estimation of the importance of anthroposophy for the history of environmentalism, McKanan asserts that his conclusion is a “pragmatic” assessment of the environmental initiatives that were directly inspired by anthroposophy, including organic agriculture and the movement to ban DDT (xv). McKanan utilizes the writings of Steiner, the broader historical context of anthroposophy and environmentalism throughout the twentieth century, and ethnographic interviews with contemporary environmentalists and anthroposophists. The result is a satisfying synthesis of contemporary fieldwork, historical analysis, and hermeneutic attention to the ideas of Steiner and his followers.

As McKanan notes, *Eco-Alchemy* is “not, primarily, a book about Rudolf Steiner” (1). In the first chapter of the text, however, McKanan offers a sketch of Steiner’s thought which will be invaluable to the reader without a background in the study of anthroposophy. McKanan outlines three major intellectual currents in which Steiner traveled: Western esotericism, evolutionary thought, and the social reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Seeing Steiner in the intersection of these three cultural trajectories is helpful in understanding the stamina of his writings up through the present day.

In the second chapter, “Biodynamics and the Roots of Organic Agriculture,” McKanan outlines the history and influence of Steiner’s agricultural vision, which he called biodynamics. Put very simply, Steiner’s biodynamics conceptualized various agricultural systems like livestock agriculture, soil quality, and plant growth as ecological and spiritually related. Biodynamics theorized these material and spiritual connections through a series of prescribed techniques and practices, many of which became foundational to organic agriculture as a whole.

McKanan is careful not to overstate his case by asserting that biodynamics represents the origin or source of the organic agriculture movement; rather, he suggests that it “was the earliest and best-known component of this movement” (23). McKanan helpfully arranges the popularizers and practitioners of biodynamics into three groups: “evangelists,” committed students of Steiner’s with a dedication to spreading his message and ideas, “translators,” who were committed to certain ideas from anthroposophy but less dedicated to Steiner or his work as a whole, and “allies,” those who had little to do with anthroposophy but collaborated with the prior two categories out of common cause. This taxonomy is helpful for understanding the scaled nature of participation in anthroposophy and esoteric groups in general. Chapter two concludes with the most surprising and fascinating episode of the entire book, in which McKanan outlines how Rachel Carson relied on evidence from legal battles between biodynamic farmers and nearby pesticide users for her 1962 book *Silent Spring*. Carson’s book is, as McKanan notes, “the founding text of contemporary environmentalism,” and Carson’s reliance on biodynamic legal cases is a stunningly convincing component of McKanan’s overall argument (67–68). Unfortunately, this crucial story is squeezed into three short pages of McKanan’s book, leaving the reader wanting much more detail about this particular cultural transaction.

Chapter three, “Anthroposophical Initiatives,” explores the ways in which anthroposophy interacted with the environmental movement in the latter half of the twentieth century. McKanan argues that this was a period of widespread cultural bridge-building between anthroposophical ideas like biodynamics and the broader environmental and agricultural movement.

Chapter four, “New Economies for Environmentalism,” explores the role of anthroposophical banking and finance in the history of environmentalism. McKanan outlines Steiner’s economic ideal of “social threefolding,” the belief that “economics, politics and culture represent three distinct social spheres” that overlap and correspond with one another (122). These ideas led to the estab-

lishment of alternative banks and financial institutions that, in different ways, understand the role of economics and finance as “cultivating human associations,” deliberately supporting communal interdependence and flourishing (121).

Chapter five, “The Broader Ecology of Camphill,” turns to the human side of anthroposophical environmentalism. Here McKanan focuses on the Camphill Movement, “a second generation anthroposophical initiative” of intentional communities that provide economic and personal opportunities for people with disabilities (153). As McKanan outlines, environmental engagement is a core component of practice at Camphill communities, and his analysis of Camphill is focused on their environmental and agricultural aspects.

Chapter six, “The Boundaries of Anthroposophy,” explores the limits of anthroposophy’s connection to environmentalism. McKanan’s discerning analysis is evident in this chapter, in which he takes pains to ensure that his argument is not mistaken for a simple one-to-one equation of anthroposophic and environmental thought. He explores some of the tensions between anthroposophy and environmentalism generally before turning to some of the incongruities between anthroposophy and “mainstream science” (179), and then anthroposophy and the “antihierarchical left” (191).

In the final chapter, “Anthroposophy’s Gifts to the Environmental Movement,” McKanan synthesizes his argument by putting forward four main *conceptual* contributions of anthroposophy to environmentalism. These are “cosmic holism,” “a homeopathic model of social change,” “appropriate anthropocentrism,” and “a vision of planetary transmutation.” McKanan’s book ends on a resoundingly optimistic note, suggesting that we should “look to the biodynamic farm as an emblem of our future” (245).

Eco-Alchemy is a rare study in the *practical* influence of esoteric thought in a variety of cultural domains. McKanan’s main point, that an understanding of anthroposophy is essential for understanding the history of environmentalism, is carefully but impactfully made and well-taken. Indeed, McKanan’s book is sug-

gestive of much more work to be done in the study of esotericism in its practical, popular, and cultural influence. My only disagreement with McKanan does not amount to a criticism of his erudite and careful scholarship; rather, it is with his enthusiasm for biodynamics as a model for the future of environmentalism. In his conclusion, McKanan notes that the anthropocentrism of Steiner's thought gives the anthroposophy movement a more optimistic attitude towards the concept of the Anthropocene, the current geological epoch marked by the dominance of *homo sapiens* on the geology, ecology, and climate of Earth: "While many environmentalists see the advent of the anthropocene era as a cause for mourning, students of Steiner are able to embrace it with joy and hope" (244). The reason for this optimism, McKanan reasons, is the "simple fact that the practice of farming lies at the heart of anthroposophical environmentalism." Anthroposophists have been working *with* nature for nearly a century, McKanan argues, and the outsized role of human beings in their environment does not present a problem for them. In this concluding gesture, McKanan's enthusiasm for biodynamics as a model for the future is unconvincing: the Anthropocene is not a *conceptual* challenge to be met by greater and greater cultural integration with some construct called "nature"; rather, it is a term of art for an unprecedented threat—mostly but not entirely attributable to the burning of fossil fuels—to the persistence of a biosphere that supports all life on earth, including *sapiens*. Biodynamic farming, for all its benefits, does not specifically address or resolve the roots of anthropogenic global warming and mass extinction.

Brief moments like this do not at all detract from the overall value of McKanan's book. *Eco-Alchemy* is a welcome contribution to the study of esotericism and the history of environmentalism, both for its unique insights and for his attention to the influence of esoteric thought and practice on popular culture.

Timothy Grieve-Carlson
trg4@rice.edu