

From Cultural Movement To Political Party

Personal Experiences of the Beginning of the Green Party in Germany

Claus Sproll

For several years during the 1970's, while living in Germany, I studied many of Rudolf Steiner's works on the threefold social order and researched questions of social development. I was very aware of Steiner's position that the Anthroposophical Society should not be involved in politics. At the same time, I was particularly aware of his constant call for students of Anthroposophy to be active in the world and to test continually the results of spiritual-scientific investigation in outer reality. In the late 1970's I was active in Stuttgart working with Anthroposophical study groups on social questions. I worked for the Free Spiritual Life Publishing Company (Verlag Freies Geistesleben) and arranged for eurhythm (a new art of movement founded by Steiner) and other cultural activities to take place there and also at other organizations with whom the publishing company did business.

At that time many socially concerned people were organizing small groups around specific social issues and problems. These people, who seemed to me to be listening to the spiritual world, though perhaps unconsciously, formed a multitude of small working and action groups, concerning themselves with issues and ideas such as the earth as a living being, the male domination of social institutions, the garbage problem, the overall social disintegration of society, poverty, the lack of community, and so on. These are all issues of the human being in his or her relation to the earth.

From my readings at that time I saw that many of the social ideas of Steiner and other Anthroposophical authors such as Bernard Lievegoed were clearly echoed in the strivings of countercultural movements. I felt a need to be outwardly active, living with the idea that the world is an organism. I started in Stuttgart in 1979 by organizing individuals into groups to help them work on local community problems such as the routing of highways, and by encouraging different groups who had common concerns, such as recycling, to work together. The problems of the disadvantaged person, the one who falls through the net of social structures, was close to my heart. The problems of the homeless, the unemployed, and the mentally ill, and society's cover-up of such problems, never left my consciousness. I spoke again and again to different groups on the importance of finding the right social structures. Later on, the development of policy in these areas within the Green Party was strongly influenced by my input.

People from many different groups began to think about adding a political voice to the idea "think globally, act locally," and thus the feeling element was trying to find an expression in addition to thinking and acting (or willing). This should be kept in mind when trying to understand why some individuals who are inspired by high aims want to be politically active.

Various interest groups began to meet together, and we had many nights of discussion and argument in which we warned ourselves about the dangers of the inherent dichotomy between our aims and those of the political system, and especially the dangers of creating a political party. Yet we all seemed to agree on certain common aims and approaches that made it possible, although with great reluctance, to say a "yes" to forming a political party. The common aims and methods can be characterized by the

following terms: ecological wisdom, Gaia-Sophia; grass-roots organizing; personal and global responsibility; social justice; nonviolence; decentralization; community-based economics; postpatriarchal values and overcoming a male-dominated society; respect for cultural and political diversity; sustainable agriculture and lifestyle.

In the fall of 1979 we decided to call a gathering of all the different interest groups to work on forming the party. First of all, we had to decide on what to call our grass-roots political movement. One thing we realized was that we were all connected to each of the above ideas, although in different ways, just as there are different colors in the rainbow. I remember a long discussion into the night about what the name of the party should be. Green, the middle color, seemed to us the color that represented all our uniting efforts, and we were then known as the Greens, and eventually the Green Party. We chose the sunflower as our symbol, which is a combination of many separate flowers that combine to make one large composite flower. Under this symbol a wide range of groups was brought together; people from the Schumacher movement, the natural-food movement, Anthroposophists, old student activists looking for social change, gay and lesbian groups, old-fashioned family groupings, working-class activists, Waldorf parents, civil-rights activists, pro-choice people, and organic gardeners. It was interesting to me that in most of the groups the people who were connected in some way to the ideas of Rudolf Steiner provided the driving force. In the beginning I remember estimating with some friends that during the formative months of the party in Germany, in 1979, about 40% of the members came out of Anthroposophical circles. These first months were full of excitement and exhilaration. As is usually the case when something new and idealistic arises, no one had any need for power; all identified with the common aims based on the common values and way of working; and all identified with certain basic ideas, such as “small is beautiful.” We all wanted to have the smallest unit be the basic power; for example, we decided that most of the money received from dues should stay in the party’s local groups and that only small amounts would go to the larger regional groups because we all feared the consequences of power. We had seen in political parties how nice people, when given power or money by the party developed a whole new set of thoughts and values. I will add here my own realization that between the “think globally” and “act locally” should be placed the feelings, the concern for others, and that the political system should be changed to allow the feeling element to have a proper place. The idea of bringing politics to the people and making them part of the process (participatory democracy) rather than onlookers was important to me. Many of us wanted threefold principles, if matters of the spiritual life and the economic life were taken out of the political realm, then politics would have to do more with real human concerns and we would achieve a forum whereby issues could be discussed and debated, regardless of individual differences and economic standing. Both the right and left had problems with the independence of the three spheres of culture, law, and economics. The left couldn’t accept not having control over culture and economics, and the right agreed to the idea of limited government but was intolerant of the idea of cultural diversity.

The forming process was strenuous: small organizing meetings took place nationwide, common-ground statements were worked through, and in long discussions we struggled to incorporate our principles in the structure of an organization. Although the leftists were happy about the idea of forming a party, many of us were actually inwardly opposed to it. This struggle culminated in an inner dilemma for many who were

there from the beginning: How can I justify going on, knowing that we are moving from a cultural movement, whose strength is based on diversity and inclusion, towards a political movement whose strength is based on uniformity and exclusion? In the early stages of the formation of the party, the slogan I had for myself was, “A party for only a short time, in order to be heard, and then back to practical work.”

We founded the party in November 1979 at a national gathering, which was like a festival. We gave the party its program and structure. The preamble is like a blueprint for threefolding in that we stated that the government should not interfere with the cultural-spiritual life and the economy. When forming the preamble, we relied on Steiner’s ideas in his appeal “To the German People and the Civilized World.” But, as soon as we became a political party, things changed. The very next day, at a local meeting in Stuttgart where usually only 20-30 people attended, many strange people suddenly appeared to join as members. All kinds of people and organizations tried to jump on the bandwagon of this rather innocent new vehicle. And as the Green Party was becoming a voice, extreme fringe groups from neo-Nazis to communists tried to infiltrate and take over the party from within. It was a constant struggle to fend them off.

There were untold struggles involving all sorts of positioning and maneuverings. In short, typical party politics emerged, as in the old parties we had always criticized, and took over almost immediately. It became extremely difficult to keep the points of discussion to the political realm, to allow the female element to speak, to allow the space for the future to speak. This was made possible mainly through the efforts and contributions of the people in the party who were spiritually inclined. Certain fringe groups were able to cause much difficulty because they could bring in full-time people financially supported by their interest groups. The communist party, for example, which had no political power at that time, supported people to attend all meetings. Therefore, meetings where there was to be voting had to be carefully watched to ensure that there was a balanced group because many of the original people in the local groups were volunteers and had full-time jobs and families to take care of. The stress of having to be at every meeting, and not being able to trust, caused some who had been active from the early days to drop out. Everything changed: the green element, the quiet middle color of the spectrum, no longer spoke. Instead, only the strong, shouting voice of a political party was heard. Agitation and power struggles increased. The original idea of only allowing a four-year term in office, regardless of ability in order to avoid the abuse of power, and the reelection issues were changed. Until the elections of 1980 there was no money available to the Green Party other than voluntary contributions, and these were small. In the election we succeeded in obtaining 5% of the vote and suddenly we became eligible for government funding according to the number of votes obtained by our party’s candidates. The party then hired full-time people who were quickly caught up in struggles over the platform and positions on ballots. This is when many more good people from the original small groups at the grass-roots level left.

I stopped working at the state level and began to be active again on the local level. As a Green Party candidate I was elected to the Stuttgart City Council where I served two years before handing it over out of frustration at half-term to another person. Even so, it was an interesting experience because of all the little things we did accomplish, such as creating play-streets, promoting recycling, and developing legislation for the disadvantaged—in short, doing things that today sound old hat but only fifteen years ago

were ground-breaking in city politics. I was also active in the fight against nuclear power, working especially with certain Anthroposophical medical doctors, giving evidence and testifying in court cases. It was both a sad and a happy day when I left. Sad, because I had seen a cultural movement move from a vigorous grass-roots organization to an organized party; from a spectrum of colors to a single force; from volunteers who wanted to participate in the political process to professional politicians—yes, green professional politicians working in a political party structure that had inherent in it mainly the dying forces of society. And happy, because I met so many people, so different yet with so many common interests and behind the differences I could sometimes see the whole and the common intentionality of each of them.

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