Arguably one of Western esotericism’s most ambitious and widely influential thinkers, Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) has left an astonishing legacy of cultural products that continue to have influence beyond the institutional reach of Anthroposophy, the new religious movement he founded. One such legacy is his system of agriculture, known today as Biodynamic Agriculture, or Biodynamics. This method, combining a distrust of modern agro-chemical applications and a desire to spiritually as well as physically nourish the individual, is now disseminated in a range of industries, and is often applied in ways that have little to do with Anthroposophy or Steiner. The current fascination in the viticulture industry for Biodynamic methods serves as a useful example for exploring what Steiner believed and set out for farmers, as well as for highlighting how these techniques are used today. Lorand’s (1996) paradigm for understanding Biodynamic Agriculture is here used to frame a discussion utilising a production of culture perspective that looks at elements of culture as shaped by the system within which they created, promoted, taught, and appraised (Peterson 1976). In order to understand how and why an esoteric agricultural method is flourishing in the twenty-first century, its origins must first be examined.

To begin, a summary of Steiner’s teachings on agriculture is provided, focusing on those issues highlighted in his 1924 Agricultural Course. This summary is a generalisation of Steiner’s thought, as his output was extensive; consisting of some forty published books, six thousand lectures (for which there are notes), and volumes of selected letters. For the purposes of discussion, this chapter focuses on the application of Biodynamic methods in the modern viticulture industry. Material drawn from wine makers and growers, wine critics, and from scholarly sources is used to demonstrate that the Biodynamic method has become solidly embedded within some winemaking and wine consuming circles. These features also provide the
content to embed in theories of cultural production. The discussion of the practices (and their associated beliefs) of Biodynamic Agriculture as a cultural product proves somewhat difficult. As Hirsch (1972) has defined them, cultural products—non-material goods that serve aesthetic and expressive functions—typically reside in the artistic realm. However, the non-material and expressive aspects of Biodynamics render it a ‘product’ that may be ‘consumed’.

*Steiner’s Agricultural Methods and Biodynamic Agriculture*

Biodynamic Agriculture is a farming system that emphasises food quality through soil health. Its current popularity in some sections of the wine-making industry is not without controversy, stemming mostly from the scientifically unproven claims Steiner made in support of the techniques, and their underpinning philosophies. The methods are drawn from a series of eight lectures Steiner gave in 1924 called the Agriculture Course.1 One of the basic principles of the Biodynamic system is the conception of the farm as an organism, or an “agricultural individuality” as Steiner (Lecture 2, Steiner 1958) termed it. Emphasis is placed upon a holistic management of this individuality, of which the farmer is a part, including the integration of livestock, crops, soil maintenance, and the recycling of soil nutrients (such as through manure). In addition, this outlook also addresses the local environment in which the farm is located, as well as its financial and social components and impacts of the farm unit. Convinced that the use of chemical fertilisers in modern agriculture was causing the degeneration of food to the point at which it would be no longer suitable for humans (Lecture 1, Steiner 1958), Steiner proposed a change in agriculture that would give up pesticides and inorganic chemicals in favour of utilising ‘cosmic forces’. These forces would act upon nature’s own material and be used as organic fertilisers, while pests would be managed by making the farm into a harmonious agricultural system. The techniques Steiner set out, he argued, would also give farmers control over the influence of both terrestrial and cosmic forces as they related to their farm.

---

1 The lectures will henceforth be referenced as ‘Lecture 1’, ‘Lecture 2’, and so on. In each case they refer to the lecture transcriptions found in the online Rudolf Steiner Archive, http://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/Agri1958/Agri1958_index.html. Accessed 20/02/2011. The lectures are copyrighted 1958.