

THE URGENCY OF SOCIAL THREEFOLDING IN A WORLD STILL AT WAR WITH ITSELF

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ABSTRACT: Rudolf Steiner's proposal for the threefolding of society is introduced and applied to the present. It is argued that a conscious differentiation (not division) of economic, political, and cultural domains brings clarity to the healthy impulses seeking expression in each domain. The hope is that such a clarification facilitates the cultivation of the collective will and moral imagination required for addressing the thicket of social conflicts dividing humanity at both local and planetary scales.

KEYWORDS: Sociology; Political Theory; Economics, Spirituality

A man counts as a free spirit in a human community only to the degree in which he has emancipated himself...from all that is generic. No man is all genus, none is all individuality; but every man gradually emancipates a greater or lesser sphere of his being, both from the generic characteristics of animal life, and from the laws of human authorities which rule him despotically. In respect of that part of his nature for which man is not able to win this freedom for himself, he forms a member within the organism of nature and of spirit. He lives, in this respect, by the imitation of others, or in obedience to their command. But ethical value belongs only to that part of his conduct which springs from his intuitions. And whatever moral instincts man possesses through the inheritance of social instincts, acquire ethical value through being taken up into his intuitions. In such ethical intuitions all moral activity of men has its root. To put this differently: the moral life of humanity is the sum-total of the products of the moral imagination of free human individuals.

—Rudolf Steiner¹

Where is the human community, still only nascently conscious of its shared origin and destiny, to find the moral imagination to overcome its tragically

¹ Steiner, *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*, 255.

persistent internal conflicts? Modern political thought, whether right or left, communist, fascist, or liberal, has thus far proven itself both inhumane and ecocidal in the face of such challenges. Western peoples, benumbed and atomized by a consumerist pseudo-religion, remain complacent and cynical behind our digital screens, addicted to doom scrolling and infotainment, unable to find clear understanding or a means of effective action in the face of overwhelming planet-scale convulsions. As the French philosopher and sociologist Edgar Morin put it in a recent op-ed:

Outside the actual war zones, we live in a warlike peace, our bodies settled in peace, our minds among bombs and rubble. We attack an enemy with words, who threatens us in return, but we sleep in our own beds, not in a shelter.²

Given the modern predilection for instrumentalist and materialist explanations of the human condition, Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) may at first appear to be a rather untimely source of insight.³ Over a century ago, amidst the revolutionary upheaval following the First World War, the Austrian philosopher, esotericist, and social reformer applied his “spiritual scientific” understanding of the human being (otherwise known as anthroposophy) to the challenges besetting contemporary societies. *Die Kernpunkte der sozialen Frage* (1919)⁴, Steiner’s book about the essential points of the social question was initially quite well received, selling tens of thousands of copies internationally and winning a glowing review in *The New York Times*: “it has novelty and bigness...the most original contribution in a generation.”⁵ Launched in Württemberg during the chaos and excitement following the November 1918 German revolution, the so-called “threefolding” movement sought clearer differentiation (distinction but not division) between the economic, political, and cultural domains. In brief and unpacked below, these domains are distinguished to protect and further human needs, human rights, and human freedom, respectively. The proposal won early support from some workers councils and industrialists, and produced a few successful spinoffs (like the now world-wide Waldorf/Steiner schools and biodynamic agriculture), but

² Morin, Edgar. “Escalation and Collapse,” *Ouest*.

³ For an overview of Steiner’s life and work, and of the influence of the Anthroposophical Society, see Zander, *Anthroposophie in Deutschland*. See also Steiner’s *Autobiography*.

⁴ Translated variously as *Towards Social Renewal*, *The Threefold Commonwealth*, and *The Threefold Social Order*.

⁵ Fox, “New Scheme of Social Organization,” *The New York Times*.

Steiner's refusal to allow the movement to conform to an established party mold soon made it the target of attacks from the right and left alike. The threefolding initiative, like the proletarian revolution, ultimately failed, leaving Germany vulnerable to the rise of the National Socialist party in the coming decades.⁶ The argument of this article is that the threefolding impulse for a more differentiated and decentralized social organization remains urgently relevant today at a time when both socialism and liberalism have proven inadequate to contemporary needs and the shadow of fascism once again looms on the horizon.⁷

⁶ For a detailed review of the threefold initiative in Germany, see Schmelzer, *The Threefolding Movement*. See also Boos, *Michael gegen Michel*.

⁷ I must mention here the polemical essays on Steiner published by historian Peter Staudenmaier. In numerous articles on the Institute for Social Ecology website and elsewhere (e.g., <https://social-ecology.org/wp/2009/01/rudolf-steiner-s-threefold-commonwealth-and-alternative-economic-thought/>), Staudenmaier has accused Steiner and anthroposophy of sheltering anti-democratic, pro-capitalist right wing political views, promulgating racism and nationalism, and even of holding proto-Nazi sympathies. While Steiner must be criticized for any misguided or racist statements, it seems to me that Staudenmaier's accusations often reflect his own metaphysical and ideological presuppositions rather than a good faith consideration of Steiner's own ideas and efforts in response to the social breakdown of the First World War. In *Between Occultism and Nazism: Anthroposophy and the Politics of Race in the Fascist Era* (2014), Staudenmaier describes the apparent internal contradictions and political pluripotentiality of Steiner's views (which a more sympathetic reading would see as attempts to hold a dialectical tension between otherwise opposed social forces) while condemning many of his anthroposophist followers for accommodating themselves to Nazi rule in the 1930s (Steiner died in 1925). Despite the condemnable associations of some of his followers, it is important to note that, while critical of the propagandistic use of "democracy" as a label for political systems whose strings were pulled by oligarchs behind the scenes, Steiner was unambiguous in his support of actual democracy in the domain of law-making and political rights (unlike in the domains of arts and sciences, athletics, and entrepreneurship, etc., where the leveling effects of majority rule would be inappropriate given the self-evident fact that individual talents in these areas are unequally distributed: the protection of equal rights and fair distribution of resources does not require denying differences in ability). Further, Steiner's rejection of ethno-nationalism could not have been more clearly stated. Hitler himself lashed out at Steiner's threefolding proposals in a 1921 newspaper article as "one of the completely Jewish methods of destroying the peoples' normal state of mind..." (*Völkische Beobachter*). "If these people come to power," Steiner said in response to Hitler's March on the Feldherrnhalle in November 1923, "I can no longer set foot on German soil" (Samweber, *Aus meinem Leben*, 44). That said, like most 19th and 20th century European philosophers and anthropologists, Steiner upheld a Eurocentric view of human history. His comments scattered through various lecture transcripts concerning historical racial hierarchies must be condemned even while they should also be read in the context of his resolutely anti-racist and anti-sexist view of the human present and future. To offer just one example, in a lecture series in 1917 on the evils that must be overcome in the future course of human evolution, Steiner states: "Nothing is more designed to take humanity into its decline than the propagation of ideals of race, nation, and blood. ... The true ideal must arise from what we find in the

It is important to clarify up front that Steiner's proposal for social threefolding is not a new partisan policy or revolutionary program aiming to overthrow existing institutions and impose a final form of government upon society. It is not an ideological manifesto imposed from on high but a handful of seeds and soil to be cultivated by those willing within and/or alongside existing structures. It is a sketch of the concrete practical work required to generate the conditions for a healthier harmonization of existing social forces operative at this particular moment in history. As human evolution is ongoing, some years from now new forces will surely predominate requiring novel modes of social organization. All "final solutions" to social problems must therefore be rejected. Further, each local situation will require creative application of the threefolding dynamic to suit its unique needs. Grand declarations in favor of universal humanity sound nice and generate warm feelings, but in the end, successful implementation and maintenance of a healthy threefold organization of society will depend upon the free spiritual activity and devotion of individual human beings. Healthy social life cannot be imposed from without even by the most perfect system of laws or the most advanced consumer goods. Right action can only arise from inspired ethical intuitions, from love of one's neighbor, and not from the threat of external censure or punishment, nor certainly from the superficial connections fostered by social media algorithms. Real solidarity with the whole of humanity, not to mention the broader Earth community and cosmos, cannot be achieved by way of abstract slogans or advertising campaigns but must be built up from and maintained by the living day-to-day agreements and associations of individuals of good will and sound mind. While practical in its emphases, Steiner's proposal for social threefolding stems from a profound faith in the human spirit. Many contemporary social and political theorists, because they bracket (or worse, explain away) the spiritual potentials of human consciousness, may for this reason dismiss the proposal as utopian. From an anthroposophical perspective, such theorists can only remain on the surface in their social analyses and prescriptions, pretending that mere legislative tinkering, piecemeal investments, lip service to empty ideals, or technocratic social engineering might reach the root of our social

world of the spirit, not in the blood" (Steiner, *The Fall of the Spirits of Darkness*, 186). Also crucial in this context are Steiner's arguments in Ch. 14: "Individuality and Genus" in *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*.

problems. Confronting and untangling the knot of unconscious social forces strangling humanity requires tapping into the “primal creative thoughts that underlie all social institutions.”⁸ Our problems are planetary in scope, but their solutions may require looking much closer to home.

Steiner’s threefolding proposal seeks to clarify and consciously further the dignities of three spheres of human activity which over the long arc of historical development have come to differentiate themselves: they are the economic, the political, and the cultural spheres. It should be apparent that Steiner is hardly the first thinker to mark a distinction between these domains.⁹ His proposal is not plucked from heaven or made from scratch but distilled from a careful study of history, five years teaching at a socialist worker’s college in Berlin, and his own firsthand experience growing up in a poor, working class family. Though sensitive to the plight of workers under exploitative capitalism, Steiner remained a spiritually motivated anarchist, rejecting revolutionary Marxist calls for state-control of the economy and education. His philosophy of freedom was grounded in a conception of the evolution of consciousness formulated in terms of what he called the “basic sociological law”:

Humanity strives at the beginning of civilization for the development of social groups. In the interest of these groups, the interest of the individual is initially sacrificed. Further development leads to the liberation of the individual from group interest and to the free unfolding of the needs and forces of the individual.¹⁰

In earlier epochs of human history, the social order was experienced as inseparable from a divine-cosmic order, i.e., as part of a “compact” cosmology in Eric Voegelin’s well-known terms.¹¹ For example, in ancient Egypt or China, the pharaoh or emperor was both god-priest and king and served as the fulcrum or meeting point between the divine hierarchy above and the social hierarchy meant to mirror it below. In modern terms, ancient compact societies are known as theocracies wherein an elitist cultural-spiritual sphere dominates all aspects of human life, with economic and politic functions remaining as yet

⁸ Steiner, *The Threefold Social Order*, 25.

⁹ Nor is he the last. For examples of contemporary leaders in threefold thought and action, see Nicanor Perlas’s *Shaping Globalization* (2019) and Martin Large’s *Common Wealth* (2010).

¹⁰ Steiner, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kultur- und Zeitgeschichte 1887-1901*, 255.

¹¹ Voegelin, *Order and History*, 44ff.

undifferentiated. Needless to say, the rallying cry of the French Revolution—*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*—affirming individual freedom, political equality, and economic solidarity, respectively, was as yet unimaginable.¹² A contemporary of Steiner's, Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947), also tasked socially minded philosophers with the conscious entertainment and articulation of those ultimate intuitions, obscured by habitual customs, that nonetheless guide human beings toward civilized order, that is, toward a society wherein the persuasion of free beings has emerged victorious over coercive force as the prime agent of history.¹³ Whitehead offered an updated reading of Plato's suggestion in the *Republic*—that the ideal state would be run by philosopher-kings:

Today, in an age of democracy, the kings are plain citizens pursuing their various avocations. There can be no successful democratic society till general education conveys a philosophic outlook.¹⁴

As European societies modernized, church and state became increasingly separated and capitalism disrupted feudal economies. New human capacities were awakened, but so, too, did new pathological imbalances become possible. Confusion about the proper function of each nascently differentiating sphere led to worsening class antagonisms and regressive absolutist power grabs. Under communist regimes, for example, the political impulse swallows and suffocates the economic and cultural spheres; under fascism, nationalist chauvinism violently erases the political rights of minority cultures and forces industry to serve the aims of the fatherland; while under the neoliberal corporate capitalist mode of production that presently dominates most of the Western world, economic interests grow so powerful that legislation, labor, and increasingly culture itself become commodified, thus hijacking human social life to serve the accumulation of private profit above all else.

¹² In *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (2021), David Graeber and David Wengrow argue that the political ideals of the Enlightenment emerged in part out of European colonial contact with the indigenous populations of the Americas, who in the available accounts from the time criticized European societies as unfree, hierarchical, and greedy (See Chapter 2, "Wicked Liberty: The indigenous critique and the myth of progress"). While compact hierarchical societies also existed in the Americas (e.g., the Aztec and Mayan empires), Graeber and Wengrow's historical argument is an important reminder that the evolution of human sociality is not a linear progression from primitive to advanced but the result of dialogical entanglements among a plurality of cultures.

¹³ Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 25.

¹⁴ Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 98.

The analogy of the human organism can be used to bring the differentiated threefold organization of society into relief, though it should not be taken literally. Steiner does not envision society as a closed hierarchical totality¹⁵ but rather as an open-ended process of becoming whose ultimate purpose, according to the basic sociological law stated above, is to protect and further the free unfolding of individuality. Using external analogies, then, we might relate the human limbs and everything having to do with metabolism to the economic sphere, while the nervous system and senses are related to the cultural sphere, and the heart and lungs or rhythmic system to the political.¹⁶ Just as a functioning human organism requires all three systems to work in harmony, each individual participates in and depends upon the healthy interaction of the social spheres. The threefold order is thus not a class-stratified pyramid but a circulating network of overlapping aspects of social life to which everyone contributes. Two dialectically intensifying aims are manifest in the threefolding proposal, one integrative and the other differentiating: (1) integrative—aiming to alleviate the tendency toward division of the social spheres into increasingly antagonistic political, cultural, and working classes, and (2) differentiating—aiming to increase each individual’s sensitivity to when, where, and how the values of each sphere are relevant to their thoughts and actions.

Given the dominance of economics in Western neoliberal societies, it is best to start with Steiner’s conception of the economic sphere. Though it will quickly

¹⁵ The social Darwinist Herbert Spenser, for example, applied biological analogies to social theory, which he intended to be taken quite literally. Thus, stratified social classes were justified by analogy to diverse organ systems and their functions. This form of closed organicism is entirely foreign to Steiner’s proposal, which seeks to further the individual freedom of each person by eliminating hierarchical class structures. Steiner’s three spheres are not class divisions, but aspects of social life freely engaged in by each individual. “Steiner’s view is not corporative-collectivistic, but democratic-individualistic” (Schmelzer, *The Threefolding Movement*, 53).

¹⁶ These external analogies should be taken as introductory suggestions only. Taking them literally leads us away from the concrete reality of social life and into abstract formulations. It also risks conflating the organization of an individual human being with that of the social organism. From an esoteric or spiritual scientific point of view, the comparison between the three spheres must be inverted, with the economy relating to the nervous system and senses, and the metabolism and limbs to the cultural sphere. Steiner emphasizes this inversion to head off, as it were, the arguments of historical materialists that law, science, religion, art, and the rest of cultural life are but ideological smoke rising from the modes and relations of production. In reality, economics is the product of human ideas and values (see *Polarities in the Evolution of Mankind*, 61ff; GA 197, Lecture 5). Thanks is due to Arthur Edward for bringing the contents of this lecture to my attention.

become apparent how, while distinguishable, the three spheres are also intimately interwoven. The idea is not to isolate them, but to thread them together more consciously. The economic sphere has to do with our biological nature as organisms and with the intelligent transformation of earthly energies into food and other commodities to meet human *needs*. In today's intensely commercialized techno-capitalist media ecology full of psychologically manipulative advertising, the economic sphere now also includes a panoply of products designed to meet an ever-growing list of *desires*. The hyper-capitalist economy is bent on quantitative growth in profits, rather than qualitative growth in human flourishing, and so new desires must always be manufactured. There is no escape from our role as consumers in the economic domain, since like all organisms we need to eat and reshape our environments to some degree in order to remain alive. But the profit motive of the capitalist economy has become so all-consuming that it systematically degrades human beings themselves to the level of commodities, e.g., by turning our attention into a product on addictive social media platforms or by forcing workers to sell their life energies for a wage (thus proving this part of Marxism correct). In a threefold order, according to Steiner, "production will be considered from the viewpoint of human needs; it will no longer be governed by processes that obscure concrete needs through an abstract scale of capital and wages."¹⁷

While he advised strongly against centralized state control of the economic sphere, Steiner insisted that the basic rights and life needs of human beings take precedence over any other economic imperatives. Private land enclosure and the expropriation of labor from workers in a classist society is not a state of nature to be accepted but a moral wrong to be emended. The true economic problem is not the proper allocation of scarce resources—a dogma erected only to protect the privilege of oligarchs and their middle-class aspirants; rather, as a contemporary interpreter of threefolding Guido Giacomo Preparata argues, the real economic problem

is indeed the exact opposite of what has hitherto been purported by the 'classics': in truth, economics prompts communities to reflect on what to do with a surplus of resources, which, as a rule, is systematically bestowed by nature on all waking

¹⁷ Steiner, *The renewal of the social organism*, 46.

human hives.¹⁸

Consider the sacrificial activity of the Sun, which transforms its own body into the light-energy that feeds all life on Earth. Preparata cites Georges Bataille's work on general economy, wherein he chronicled the various ways human societies have dealt with the problem of surplus, from war, human sacrifice, and industrial waste to monumental architecture and potlatch ceremonies. Humanity was aware of the Sun's generosity "long before astrophysics measured that ceaseless prodigality; they saw it ripen the harvests and they associated its splendor with the act of someone who gives without receiving."¹⁹ The need to reflect upon the proper and just use of surpluses (which, as Bataille clearly shows, can become a curse as easily as a blessing) provides an example of how the spheres inevitably overlap and check one another, as in our political relations individuals are ethically bound to treat one another as ends, never as means (as Kant argued). By privatizing land and extracting the "labor time" of workers, the economic domain of commodity exchange trespasses into what are really political issues. Steiner considered the idea that an abstraction called "labor time" might be sold as a commodity (as in the wage system) to be a lie rooted in an injustice. Human productive capacity, physical or mental, is essential to our existence as free individuals. To be severed from this capacity, as occurs under the wage system, is tantamount to a form of enslavement, as it inevitably leads to a class division between those who must sell themselves to make ends meet and those who own enough to either work only for themselves or to retire into a state of indefinite leisure. "The harmfulness of the non-working recipient of dividends is not that to a small degree they diminish the working man's earnings," argues Steiner, "but that the sheer possibility of someone being able to have income without working for it lends an anti-social aspect to the whole economic body."²⁰ Steiner compared the accumulation of such unearned dividends to a "tumorous growth" in the social organism. Further, in producing desires rather than meeting needs, the economic sphere trespasses into the cultural. Ideally, according to Steiner's vision, cultural life is the domain wherein human beings treat one another not as raw material to be manipulated or energy to be harvested but as free spirits to be

¹⁸ Preparata, "Perishable Money in a Threefold Commonwealth," 643.

¹⁹ Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 28-29.

²⁰ Steiner, *The renewal of the social organism*, 11.

befriended along the path of mutual growth.

Steiner's understanding of modern economics follows from the consequences of the division of labor, which he expressed in terms of the "fundamental social law":

The well-being of a community of human beings working together is the greater, the less the individual claims for himself the proceeds from his work, that is, the more of these proceeds he gives over to his fellow workers and the more his needs are satisfied not from his own work but from the work of others.²¹

A healthy economic sphere would leave room for free enterprise and individual ingenuity but would involve new conceptions of cooperative management and property ownership, including "temporary disposition rights" over land and capital contingent upon functional service to the whole community of economic stakeholders (i.e., producers, distributors, and consumers).²² Property rights become property wrongs whenever they infringe upon our equal political status as free human beings.²³ Rather than cutthroat competition, the economy's guiding ideal would be cooperative association and solidarity, making sure the entire human community has its needs met and only allowing entrepreneurial profits as a reward for those whose initiative contributes to improved efficiency in production and distribution. Usury and rent-seeking, mainstays of our runaway capitalist economy, would be strictly forbidden in a healthy threefold society, as money itself would (like the goods it is used to purchase) be made perishable so as to prevent hoarding and encourage the gifting of surpluses to support cultural activities. "The seed of all economic imbalance," argues Preparata, "is the commodification of money....The antidote to the usurious malady...is straightforward: let the sign mimic the object, let the money die."²⁴ Steiner thus distinguished between three phases of money's metamorphosis, each corresponding to a different stage of the economic cycle: "purchase money" used to procure the perishable goods of agriculture; "loan money" used to invest community wealth via the intelligent use of industry to bring forth new

²¹ Steiner, *Lucifer-Gnosis*, 34.

²² For more on Steiner's re-imagining of property rights, see Schmelzer, *The Threefolding Movement*, 56ff and Preparata, "Perishable Money in a Threefold Commonwealth," 629-630.

²³ Steiner, *Die Kernpunkte der sozialen Frage*, 89.

²⁴ Preparata, "Perishable Money in a Threefold Commonwealth," 647.

productive endeavors and labor-saving inventions; and “gift money” used to reinvest surpluses in cultural activities.²⁵ Steiner did not pretend to have any simple solutions for determining just pay for a particular form of work, whether physical or spiritual, but sought rather to clarify that such determinations are a political and cultural issue and thus not to be reduced to the level of commodity exchange between parties of unequal economic power. In service of supporting the negotiation of what he called the “true price” of the products of labor, he offered the following rule of thumb:

A ‘true price’ is forthcoming when a man receives, as counter-value for the product he has made, [monies] sufficient to enable him to satisfy the *whole* of his needs, including of course the needs of his dependents, until he will again have completed a like product.²⁶

Steiner contended that a person cannot remain spiritually free or politically equal if they’ve been severed from their labor power to serve someone else’s profit motive.

In our age of ecological unraveling, a healthy economic sphere must also be premised upon recognizing our kinship with all life on Earth. Maximization of profit undertaken in total ignorance of the human economy’s utter dependence upon the Gaian oikos is suicidal. Our laboring bodies and their technological extensions are bound up in an ecological continuum with the living Earth, such that the economy forms one inseparable planetary metabolism. The question of the role of technology in a well-functioning threefold social order deserves its own careful extended study. Preliminarily, it seems clear enough that machines and automation can serve to further human freedom by liberating us from especially alienating forms of labor. On the other hand, the rush to technologize everyday life without respect for or sensitivity to the spiritual element in the world may also lead us unintentionally into increased alienation from nature and the amputation of important human capacities. The challenge of this contradiction may be lessened by coming to see the relationship between nature and techne from a less reductively anthropocentric perspective.²⁷

²⁵ Steiner, *World economy*, 84–95.

²⁶ Steiner, *World economy*, 84–95. Steiner adds that such needs include rest and recreation.

²⁷ For an example of a cosmocentric philosophy of technology, see Segall, “Whitehead and Media Ecology.”

The cultural sphere has to do with our spiritual nature as free, creative individuals. It includes everything to do with our individual and communal striving in education, athletics, art, media, science, and religion. Unless rights are infringed or commodities exchanged, neither the state nor the economy should interfere with what free individuals bring forth in the cultural domain, whether through regulation of speech, control of school curricula, or direction of scientific research. The call for education to be freed from state control is likely to raise the eyebrows of contemporary progressives, who argue for the importance of public schooling both to push religion into private life and to instill democratic values. After segregation was declared unconstitutional in the United States by a 1954 Supreme Court ruling, public schooling also became an essential part of building a less racist, more multicultural society. While instilling democratic values must be part of the educational process, it is hard to deny that, in practice, state regulation of schools has also had many negative side-effects, including administrative bloat and the deadening effects of standardized testing. While the ideal vision for public schooling would assure quality education was provided to every child regardless of race or class, the fact is that the quality of public schools still varies dramatically by neighborhood. State-controlled education also fosters a situation wherein corporate interests as well as parents of diverse cultural outlooks vie for the political power to impose their worldview on curricula, thus pushing teachers into passive, prescribed roles. Steiner envisioned a proliferation of diverse independent schools run by teachers and centered upon the developmental needs of each student rather than the administration of standardized tests. As under a threefold scheme, access to education is still considered a political right rather than a privilege for the wealthy, all parents would receive an educational credit (the amount being established by way of a negotiation between political, economic, and cultural spheres) and could then decide to send their children to the schools of their choice. Democratic states may decide to impose anti-segregation laws in order to assure the right of all children to quality education regardless of race and class. The ideal to keep in mind when considering the place of education within the cultural sphere is that such an activity is an end in itself, a lifelong source of spiritual development for individuals, and not a means of producing pliant worker-consumers for corporate capitalism or loyal partisans for whichever party happens to hold a governing

majority at the time.

At this point, attentive readers may have noticed that Steiner's two laws, mentioned above, appear to stand in tension with one another. While the basic sociological law of human evolution points to a progressive movement away from collectivism in favor of individuality, the fundamental social law reveals how economically enmeshed modern people have become. Though hyper-capitalist neoliberal economic relations encourage us to emphasize greed and selfishness as primary human motivations, in fact the division of labor driving the modern world-economy has made us more dependent upon one another for our basic needs than ever before. Steiner's description of cooperative associations may sound utopian, but viewed from the proper angle, it is simply an observation about the actual functioning of contemporary economic conditions. Today, very few of us would be able to survive without countless forms of work done by others, from the growing of food, to the building of houses, to the manufacture of microchips. Anyone who sought to sever themselves from the economic community by producing in isolation would incur prohibitively higher costs.²⁸ The problem, of course, is that the materialist idea of human nature as basically selfish and greedy obscures the fundamental social law from our view. Steiner writes:

[The] desire for profit is not a fundamental aspect of human nature. It is this mistake that makes people say constantly, 'to realize the threefold social order, human beings must be different from what they are now.' No! Through the threefold order, people will be educated in such a way that they will grow up to be different from what they were previously under the economic state. . . . Social thinking cannot reckon with external conditions alone, it must take into account what man is and what he may become.²⁹

The political sphere, then, is where free and equal individuals democratically decide upon their rights and responsibilities to one another. The sphere of rights thus mediates between the otherwise antisocial tendencies of the economic sphere (i.e., our needs as biological organisms) and the asocial tendencies of cultural sphere (i.e., our desire to be free individuals). In threefolding interpreter Dieter Brüll's terms:

²⁸ Preparata, "Perishable Money in a Threefold Commonwealth," 634.

²⁹ Steiner, *The renewal of the social organism*, 82-83.

As antisocial [economic] beings we have the tendency to treat other people as objects. As asocial [spiritual beings] we belittle their dignity in a different way, namely by wanting to resurrect ourselves in them, by wanting the other person to confirm our ‘truths.’ Freedom is particularly endangered if we use the law or the economy to accomplish this. The life of rights exists in order to see to it that this asocial drive is allowed free reign only where it belongs—in self-development. Therefore, the life of the spirit should be ordered in such a way that the individual is protected against the asocial tendencies of his fellows. ... The life of the economy must lose the rights which it has usurped, and the life of the spirit must be shielded with new rights to protect it against overreaching on the part of the state and the economy.³⁰

While some degree of competition among free individuals is inevitable and even appropriate in our cultural activities, Steiner argues that a moral misunderstanding or clash of aims is impossible between truly free beings. This is because when two or more people mutually recognize one another’s freedom, though we remain individual in our experience and expression we nonetheless draw insight from the same ideal spiritual source, rather than from external impressions or arbitrarily imposed laws:

To live in love of action and to let live in understanding of the other’s volition, this is the fundamental maxim of the free man. ... If sociability were not deeply rooted in human nature, no external laws would be able to inoculate us with it. It is only because human individuals are akin in spirit that they can live out their lives side by side.³¹

Thus whatever the value of our unique intuitions and abilities as free individuals in the cultural sphere, in the political sphere our social feelings of equality demand of us that we agree to legally protect the basic rights and freedoms of everyone regardless of race, class, gender, or any other generic characteristic. These rights are inalienable, protected rather than provided by governments. As German idealists like Fichte and Hegel showed (both important influences on Steiner), our feeling for such rights stems from the dialectic of recognition engendered by our direct encounters with one another: “No You, no I; No I, no You,” as Fichte put it.³² It is not the necessities of nature that threaten human freedom, but the hardening of our capacity for feeling the sacred

³⁰ Brüll, *The Mysteries of Social Encounters*, 183.

³¹ Steiner, *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*, 169-170.

³² Fichte, *Fichtes sämtliche Werke*, 189.

otherness that arises from immediate face-to-face encounters.³³ In his classic study of such relations, *I and Thou*, Martin Buber framed it this way:

The unlimited reign of causality in the world of It, of fundamental importance for the scientific ordering of nature, does not weigh heavily on man, who is not limited to the world of It, but can continually leave it for the world of relation. Here I and Thou freely confront one another in mutual effect that is neither connected with nor colored by any causality. Here man is assured of the freedom both of his being and of Being. Only he who knows relation and knows about the presence of the Thou is capable of decision. He who decides is free, for he has approached the Face. ... If a culture ceases to be centered in the living and continually renewed relational event, then it hardens into the world of It, which the glowing deeds of solitary spirits only spasmodically break through.³⁴

The United States Declaration of Independence lists “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” as the self-evident rights of every human being. In contemporary post-industrial democracies, the practical realization of such rights has increasingly come to be understood (if not yet legally codified) to require the democratic provision of food, housing, education, and healthcare. Absent such provisions, individuals would be unable to live, much less live freely in pursuit of happiness. Rather than envisioning such basic life needs as privileges for those who can afford them, a healthy social order would assure that working people are paid enough to meet these needs and that anyone unable to work (whether due to disability, injury, or other justifiable reasons) would not therefore lose their equal status as a human being worthy of life and spiritual dignity. The idea is decidedly not for a state centralized command and control economy to subsume agriculture, industry, schools, and medicine, but for reasonable laws to be passed and taxes levied on economic activities that assure gainful employment and the just distribution of surplus monies to those in need. There’s no question, however, that the threefolding proposal would involve dramatically shrinking the size and role of modern governments, as much of the work done by the current state apparatus would become matters for the economic associations and cultural initiatives to take up. The state would be limited to the legislative and administrative functions required to protect individual rights and enforce social

³³ For an in-depth study of Steiner’s experiential account of the intersubjective moral imagination necessary for healthy democracy in the political sphere, see Traub, “I and Thou.”

³⁴ Buber, *I and Thou*, 36-38.

responsibilities at the behest of fully inclusive democratic procedures. Again, the goal of threefolding is not to magically resolve all the problems of social life, but to find better directions for our social arrangements to move. The tensions manifest between individual striving, political equality, and economic solidarity are healthy so long as they are folded into the overall organization of society in a mutually balancing way.

Though no less critical of capitalist exploitation, Steiner rejected the Marxist reduction of cultural and spiritual life to mere ideology. Materialism, whether of the neoliberal or Marxist variety, implants the false idea that our feeling for justice and conceptions of spirituality are simply side-effects of economic conditions. Marx is often credited with turning Hegel's dialectical idealism into a potent political weapon in the revolutionary fight for control over the material conditions of history. Steiner's work in ethics and epistemology especially as articulated in *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* (1894)³⁵ may yet still serve as a brilliant philosophical justification for anarchist praxis, though without succumbing to Chomsky's Cartesianism³⁶ or to any sort of crass materialism. On the contrary, Steiner felt that Marxists and some anarchists were themselves blinded by the ideological dead weight of scientific materialism and so failed to recognize the spiritual origin of their own impulse for political justice. He supported workers in their struggle against capitalist exploitation while also inviting them to participate in the cultural life which to that point had been largely reserved for the upper and middle classes. This is not to say, however, that Steiner was blind to the power of bourgeois ideology. During his campaign for social threefolding in Stuttgart, he reminded upper middle-class theosophists and anthroposophists that the comfortable homes they withdrew to in order to contemplate spiritual ideas about universal human brotherhood were heated with coal mined by children.³⁷ He sought both to remind the upper classes of the plight of workers, and to awaken workers to the spiritual sources of human freedom, with the aim of seeding the social soil so as to foster a free and creative cultural sphere, genuine legal and political equality for everyone, and an associative, regenerative economy serving humanity and the Earth, not just private profits.

³⁵ Later translated and published as *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*.

³⁶ Chomsky, *Cartesian Linguistics*.

³⁷ Schmelzer, *The Threefolding Movement*, 108.

In addition to working within Germany and Switzerland to implement a threefold organization of society, Steiner sought to apply his ideas to diagnose and ameliorate international conflict. He understood the First World War to be symptomatic of an inappropriate fusion of the cultural, political, and economic aspects of social life under the all-encompassing umbrella of the modern nation-state. Steiner's criticisms of Woodrow Wilson's call for national self-determination have often been misunderstood by opponents as evidence that his proposal is anti-democratic. Steiner stood against the imposition of Wilson's abstract proposal because he felt it totally ignored the actual social conditions of Europe, where for example Lithuanians, Estonians, Latvians, Poles, Ukrainians, Russians, Czechs, Slovaks, Germans, Hungarians and others of unique cultural and linguistic heritage lived side by side. Imposing nation-state borders upon such a situation would inevitably lead to the oppression of minority groups and the severing of existing economic relations.³⁸ Steiner feared that the Wilsonian doctrine's confusion regarding the appropriate relationship between the political state, economy, and cultural or national life of a people would only lead to further conflict.³⁹ He attempted to convince any German officials who would listen (including foreign minister Richard von Kühlmann, who represented Germany at the Brest-Litovsk peace negotiations in March 1918, and the imperial chancellor Max von Baden⁴⁰) that threefolding could prevent further conflict by allowing for cultural self-determination alongside protection of individual rights and free economic associations. Alas, the power politics of the nation-state system won out, leaving the diverse peoples of Europe helpless against the rise of ethno-nationalist genocide and yet another even bloodier world war less than two decades later.

Given the war currently waging in Ukraine and threats of geopolitical conflict elsewhere, the urgency of differentiating between legal rights (whereby our universal democratic equality is to be recognized and protected) and spiritual freedoms (whereby our unique imaginations, inspirations, and intuitions are to

³⁸ Schmelzer, *The Threefolding Movement*, 42.

³⁹ Not to mention the fact that Wilson's proposal for national autonomy evidently did not apply to the Allied Powers, as England was not required to give up its rule over Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, nor were the United States and other Western European powers required to forfeit their colonial empires.

⁴⁰ Schmelzer, *The Threefolding Movement*, 45-46.

be cultivated), which are pathologically merged in the idea of the modern nation-state, has only become more relevant. Similarly, as the consequences of the struggle over Ukrainian grain and Russian gas exports continue to ripple around the globe, it is increasingly obvious that all of humanity is inextricably knitted together in a single world economy. Oligarchs in the US, Russia, Ukraine, and around the world further their private interests by playing the nation-state system against itself, quietly benefitting from the tremendous profits won through international trade while fueling nationalist hatred at home through their monopolistic control of media. Further, the fusion of state and economic interests represented by the military-industrial complex has turned war and the threat of war into a highly profitable enterprise.

There are no easy solutions to resolve the conflicts that continue to lead our world down the warpath. History is a bloody ruin of failed ideologies. What social threefolding offers is not a ready-made solution but a new understanding of the problem rooted in a deeper perception of human needs, desires, and capacities. Its specific suggestions in the realms of politics, economics, and cultural life seek to balance the one-sidedness of more well-worn modern ideologies stemming from progressive and conservative orientations alike. This provides an opportunity for threefolding to forge pragmatic alliances to begin working within existing social conditions but also leaves any successful movement vulnerable to shallow attacks from all sides. Steiner felt that the historical conditions amenable to the threefolding organization would prevail for several centuries hence, meaning the effort to implement a more differentiated social theory and praxis respecting economic initiative and reciprocity, political dignity and equality, and individual cultural freedom remains a long-term but for that reason no less immediately urgent spiritual task.

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