

## THE THREEFOLD NATURE OF SOCIAL LIFE

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This is the second in a series of four articles on Rudolf Steiner's social ideas by Gary Lamb. They will cover the Fundamental Social Law and the threefold nature of social life, including the principles of associative economics.

*As I see it, there are two great forces of human nature: self-interest, and caring for others. Capitalism harnesses self-interest in helpful and sustainable ways, but only for those who can pay. Philanthropy and government aid channel our caring for those who can't pay. But the resources run out before they meet the need.*

Bill Gates, speaking at the World Economic Forum, Davos, Switzerland (January 24, 2008)

*Precisely because one finds social impulses or drives in human nature, one also finds the opposite. . . . The precise need of the future is that the social shall be brought to meet the antisocial in a systematic way.*

Rudolf Steiner, "Social and Antisocial Forces," Bern, Switzerland (December 12, 1918)

### INTRODUCTION

The principles of biodynamic agriculture and the threefold social organism arose from the same spiritual soil: Rudolf Steiner's spiritual-scientific view of the human being, earth, and cosmos. What Steiner described in micro, or agricultural, terms as the "farm individuality" and in macro, or economic terms, as the "closed domain economy" are similar in that they are both meant to be sustainable systems—that is, living organisms that need to be continually rejuvenated by spiritual or cosmic forces. If sustainable agriculture is to be a significant factor in world food production, we must find a way for the farm as a living organism to thrive locally and regionally in the context of a sustainable global economy. Just as Steiner indicated in his agriculture lectures in 1924, farming, insofar as it is economically productive, is environmentally exploitive unless rejuvenating forces are harnessed or enhanced. So, too, he maintained in his social writings and lectures that if the economy is left to its own devices without counterbalancing spiritually creative and inspired ideas and actions it is exploitive, even culturally and environmentally destructive. All sustainable systems, whether at the individual, farm, organizational, or societal level, are dependent on harnessing or invigorating cosmic or spiritual forces. Individual meditation, religious rituals, sacred music and dance, anthroposophic and homeopathic potentization techniques, wind turbines, solar collectors, and biodynamic compost and sprays are all means to harness and/or enhance spiritual or cosmic forces. This series of essays is an effort to describe social arrangements that foster spiritual rejuvenation in all aspects of society, including the economy.

In the previous issue we considered the Fundamental

Social Law and some of its corollaries as characterized by Rudolf Steiner. This ancient esoteric law identifies mutual aid and a concern for others as a key factor in human evolution and as the appropriate basis for economic life, rather than egoism or self-interested behavior. Even so, egoism and self-interest exist as features of the human soul and will become increasingly stronger as humanity evolves. Therefore, one of our tasks in considering new social arrangements is how and where self-interest or egoism can be put to good use.

Rudolf Steiner was one of the first sociologists to speak of a three-part society—or a threefold social organism, as he called it—consisting of three relatively autonomous, yet interdependent realms of culture, rights, and economics. However, it is now quite common to find politicians and sociologists speaking about a three-sectored society, even though their descriptions of a threefold society are often in contraction to his. What one calls these sectors is not as important as how they are meant to operate in terms of function, jurisdiction, and inherent dynamics, and how each sphere should relate to each other.

Just as the economy cannot be viewed in isolation from the rest of social life if we want to develop new socio-economic forms for sustainable agriculture, this essay will consider the whole of society from a threefold perspective. And then in the following essay (in the Fall issue of *Biodynamics*), we will focus on the main features of an associative economy in harmony with the Fundamental Social Law and contrast them with the main features of the modern market economy based on self-interest and competition.

### BACKGROUND TO THE THREEFOLD SOCIAL ORGANISM

Rudolf Steiner first introduced his ideas about a threefold social organism in 1917 in response to a question put to him by a German politician Otto von Lerchenfeld. The question essentially was: what could Steiner suggest be done in order for the world to experience lasting peace? Lerchenfeld felt that, if fundamental changes in our modern society were not made, ongoing social unrest would continue. An enthusiastic and rapidly expanding group of people soon surrounded Steiner, and together they tried to introduce his ideas on a large scale in post-World War I Europe from 1917 to 1922. These efforts included meeting with leading politicians in Austria and Germany; inserting petitions, memoranda, and advertisements in major European publications; giving hundreds of lectures to youth groups, trade unions, and the public; creating a think tank and political advocacy organization; writing a best-selling book on social threefolding; and creating a magazine along with writing numerous essays. Steiner's main book, now translated as *Towards Social Renewal*, was reviewed very favorably in British and U.S. publications. In the 1923, *A New York Times* reviewer described it as "the most original contribution in a generation" to sociological literature, highlighting the fact that Steiner "would reorganize society in such a way as to bring it into conformity with spiritual realities."<sup>1</sup> When these efforts failed to take hold on a large scale, threefold enthusiasts tried to introduce certain aspects of threefolding on a local and regional basis through such initiatives as the first Waldorf School, an effort to advance educational and cultural

freedom; the Coming Day and Futurum holding companies, which were associations of collaborating farms, businesses, and cultural ventures; and a public speakers group that engaged in the political debates in Germany.

Since that time, threefold ideas still have not taken hold on a large scale, but they have been a catalyst and an inspiration for many founders and activists in innovative and alternative initiatives and movements around the world, including community supported agriculture (CSA), community land trusts, ethical banking, community investment, fair trade, complementary currencies, organizational development, the Green Party, educational freedom, school choice, medical freedom, and communities for the elderly and people with special needs.<sup>2</sup> Notably, two recent winners of the Right Livelihood Award (known as the alternative Nobel Prize) were Abraham Aboulesh, founder of the multifaceted Sekem community in Egypt, and Nicanor Perlas from the Philippines, both of whom are inspired by Steiner's social ideas.

## THE THREEFOLD HUMAN BEING

Before Rudolf Steiner introduced his ideas on the threefold social organism and associative economics, he spent decades of study and research focused on the nature of the human being, including the interrelation of body, soul, and spirit. It was only after he gained a thorough understanding of these three aspects that he felt ready to speak about social life. Steiner maintained that this understanding was essential because our outer social structures need to reflect our essence as human beings and our relation to nature and the cosmos. If we can understand the human being as a spiritually imbued living organism, this can help us to think in a new way about society as a spiritually imbued social organism.<sup>3</sup>

If we consider body, soul, and spirit, we find that there is an inherent threefolding within each of them as well. Physiologically, Steiner described that there are three main systems of activity in the human body: a nerve-sense system centered in the head region, a rhythmic system centered in the mid-region of the body, and the metabolic limb system centered mainly in the lower region and extremities. So, too, the soul can be viewed as having three primary functions of thinking, feeling, and willing. The spirit also can be viewed in terms of three levels of cognition or thinking: Steiner used the terms of imagination, inspiration, and intuition in describing these.

Even though the three main systems of the body just mentioned are centered in specific regions, each extends through the whole human organism, intertwining and interacting with the others. The proper functioning of each system is dependent on the health and vitality of the other systems. If one of them

becomes overactive in an area where it should not, illness can arise. For example, when the metabolism works too strongly in the head region, congestion or migraines can occur. Or, if nerve sense activity becomes too strong in the lower extremities, ulcers can arise.

These insights into the threefold bodily organism can help us think in a new way about the threefold social organism. The three spheres of culture, rights, and economy can be viewed as three distinct centers of activity that reach out and interpenetrate throughout the whole social organism. Social illness can arise in a manner similar to illness in the human organism. For example, when the economy dominates our rights or political realm too strongly, democracy becomes diseased, and when the religious aspect within our cultural life intrudes into our political life inappropriately, the social illness of religious intolerance can become codified in law. These examples show how a deeper understanding of the human organism helps to gain insight into our social organism.

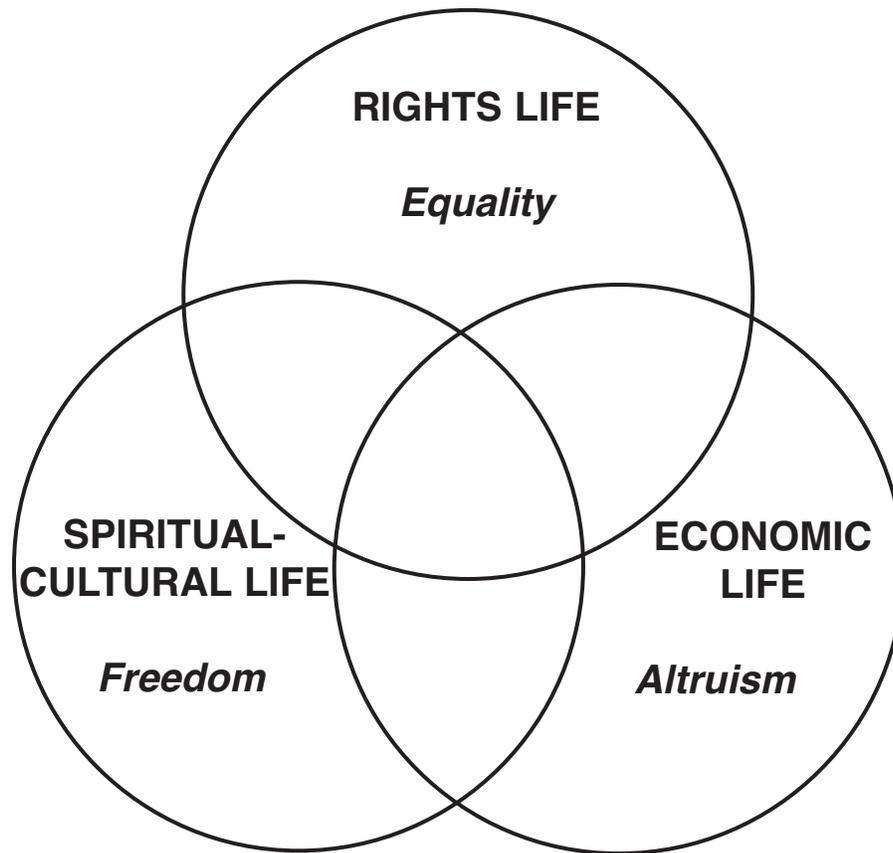
In the soul realm, thinking, feeling, and willing need to be in relative harmony if we are to be in good moral and mental health. Here too, if one of these functions becomes overly active or unduly dominates another realm, psychological illnesses can arise. For instance, an overly strong will can result in cold-heartedness and irrational behavior. A corresponding image on the societal level is when economic life dominates politics to the detriment of civility and human rights.

On a spiritual level, imaginative thinking or the ability to think in pictures is helpful in understanding the creation of commodities and the flow of economic transactions. In a healthy economy, these processes require the ability to picture economic circulation and people's situations. For consumers, it means picturing the people who produce and deliver our goods, for producers it means picturing the situation of the distributors and consumers, and for distributors it means picturing producers on one side and consumers on the other. According to Steiner, we need inspired thoughts to enable people to have the right relation to labor and to develop a love of work. And intuitive thinking, which enables one to understand the inner nature and capacities of individuals, is helpful in determining where and how capital can be best used and who is best capable of utilizing it on behalf of society.<sup>4</sup>

## THE THREEFOLD SOCIAL ORGANISM

An illustration that is often used to depict the threefold social organism is three intersecting or overlapping circles representing each of the three main sectors of society—spiritual-cultural, rights or political, and the economy—and their relation to each other. (See illustration.) Admittedly, this is a simplistic

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**The Threefold Social Organism:  
Three Vitally Important Spheres of Social Life**

image of what in reality is an exceedingly complex living organism. Nonetheless, it provides a useful starting point for gaining a deeper understanding of the threefold nature of social life. The three realms need to be viewed as *three vitally important* aspects of social life with their own inherent function and jurisdiction. No one of them should dominate or intrude on the others in an inappropriate way. It is apparent today that economic thinking and interests dominate both the political and cultural realms, including education.

Each of these three distinct, yet overlapping, circles represents a concentration of powerful creative forces that need to radiate into and support the other two. Imagine, first of all, each one of the three spheres represented by the circles grounded in its own inherent function. The function of the spiritual-cultural life, which includes education in the broadest sense, is to foster the development of the human being both inwardly and outwardly and is based on the principle of individual freedom. The political or rights sphere fosters human relations and needs to be grounded in democracy and equality; its appropriate focus should be the recognition and upholding of human rights. And finally, the economy in a threefold social organism is based on altruism, cooperation, and interdependence, and meeting earthly and spiritual needs is its primary purpose.

Let us now briefly consider the three spheres and how they should relate to each other.

**SPIRITUAL-CULTURAL LIFE**

In the spiritual or cultural realm, our primary concerns in the field of education are to develop the unique capacities that each person brings down from the spiritual world, in addition to recognizing the intentions and tasks of each generation as a whole. It is through this activity in the spiritual-cultural sphere, which needs to be free from undue economic and political influences, that rejuvenating spiritual forces can enter into social life through individual human beings. And it is these forces that can counterbalance one-sided, and at times destructive, economic tendencies.

Human beings are of little service to themselves or to the world if they do not strive to develop their latent capacities and develop new ones. In this sense, self-interest and individualism are legitimate starting points for spiritual-cultural life. However, a healthy spiritual-cultural life does not merely foster individualism and self-development. It also fosters a concern and care for other people and the world at large. In such a way, people go beyond their desire for personal development to include the needs of others. Our individual capacities thus become socialized.

How one goes about his or her personal development, care, and education should be the free decision of each adult, or the concern of parents or guardians on behalf of their children

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until they reach maturity. Thus, freedom and self-determination are essential regarding cultural matters such as education, religion, nutrition, and medicine.

In order to avoid one-sided individualism and irresponsible behavior, the desire or demand for ever greater freedom in social life needs to be balanced by a growing sense of responsibility. Individual freedom also needs to be balanced by tolerance. The freedom to develop and express one's own views must be balanced by a tolerance of the views, opinions, and life decisions of others. In summation, true cultural freedom requires a highly developed sense of responsibility and a high degree of cultural tolerance.

From a threefold perspective, the principles of self-interest and competition find their rightful home in the spiritual-cultural realm rather than in the economy. A provider of any type of cultural service—a teacher, for instance—needs to “compete” for the appreciation of potential families who might send their children to the school where the teacher is engaged. The conditions necessary for healthy competition in the cultural realm, including the field of education, are freedom of thought, free appreciation, freedom of choice, and sufficient financial resources on the part of patrons and consumers to express such appreciation and choices.

With regard to the soul functions—thinking, feeling, and willing—Steiner suggests the starting point in the spiritual-cultural development in modern culture is thinking. Strengthening and deepening our thinking can also help enhance and refine our feelings and consciously direct our will.

In summarizing, the spiritual-cultural realm in a healthy threefold social organism is:

- Encompassed by the field of education in the broadest sense, including science, art, and religion;
- Related initially to self-interested behavior, the soul function of thinking, and the development of innate capacities derived from pre-birth;
- Based on freedom of thought, choice, expression, and association;
- Characterized by individualism, pluralism, and competition; and
- Balanced by the cultivation of a sense of responsibility, tolerance, and love that leads to a concern for others, and the development of capacities to be of service to society.

## ECONOMIC LIFE

When considering economic life from the perspective of a threefold social organism, the ideal starting point is not individualism and self-interest, but rather group or collective decision-making processes by those actively involved in economic life and altruism. Appropriate decisions in economic life, such as determination of quantities, pricing, allocation of resources, and quality standards, need to arise from groups of individuals sharing perspectives and practical experiences rather than solely from the limited insight of an individual or individuals who may not even be participating in the economic transactions under consideration. This decision-making could be done by individuals directly or through their representatives. This is not to be misconstrued as centralized socialist planning, but rather as decision-making by freely formed groups within economic life. Rudolf Steiner recommended that a market of collaborating associations of producers, distributors, and consumers gradually replace the impersonal competitive market based on self-interested behavior. Since the economy is in a constant state of movement, with goods and services being continually created, transported, and consumed, economic decisions need to be continually adjusted over time according to existing conditions.

Through such collaboration, we can work toward an economic life that focuses on meeting the real needs of consumers rather than meeting needs instilled in people through corporate advertising aimed at creating new markets.

Whereas cultural life is anchored in thought development or thinking, business and economic activity is related to the will element in the soul life of the human being. Moreover, whereas cultural life begins with innate capacities brought from the past through the gate of birth, the soul attitudes of fellowship, brotherhood, and servant leadership developed in economic life are the social building blocks for future human evolution. In the economic realm, *what* we produce (goods and services) has bearing on the future in an earthly sense, and *how* we conduct business (the soul attitudes and motivation of those engaged in business) has bearing on the future evolution of humanity in a spiritual, ethical, and moral sense.

Business or economic activity is characterized by doing, making, processing, transporting, communicating, and so on. In order to be efficient and prosperous, business activities need technical expertise, efficiency, and the intelligent division of labor. Even though multiple perspectives are required for making the most appropriate economic decisions at a given time and place, provisions also need to be made for private initiative and the entrepreneurial creative spirit to produce goods and services in an efficient manner, based on these collective insights.

Therefore, we need to view the circle in our illustration that represents an economic life imbued with social responsibility as:

- Encompassed by the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services that support all three spheres;
- Related to the soul function of willing and work that meets material and spiritual needs;
- Based on altruism and the soul attitude of fellowship that carry on into the future;
- Characterized by cooperation, collaboration, associations, and interdependence; and
- Balanced by private initiative and entrepreneurship.

#### RIGHTS LIFE

Consider now the middle realm that weaves between cultural life and economic activity: the realm of human rights, including politics, legal affairs, and civility. Here the concern is not so much with personal development or for efficient production but rather a concern with human relations—in other words, how we relate to one another in all types of situations and activities. This includes matters such as fairness, civility, standards of conduct, proscriptions, agreements, public health, safety (including environmental protection), and security. The political or legal decisions made about these issues should be applied in a consistent fashion to all three realms. In a healthy threefold society, equality should prevail in the rights realm, just as individualism and uniqueness should hold sway in cultural life, and collaboration and productivity are important in economic life. The experience of equality in the rights sphere is essential for a person to have a sense of worth, dignity, and self-respect regardless of what one might be doing and where one might be positioned in the other realms of culture and business.

In an appropriately organized, democratically based political state, we are continually oscillating between self-interested behavior and a concern for others and the greater community. That I want my say and assert my rights are expressions of self-interest. But as a democratic citizen, I am also obliged to ensure that other people's rights are upheld and yield to the decision of the majority once everyone has had a say.

The formation of rights is related to the soul function of feeling. How a community of people feels about each other and how people feel about the various groups within their community is reflected not only in the laws that they create, but also in how the laws are applied and enforced. To the degree that members in a democratic society refine their feelings toward their fellow human beings, so, too, laws can evolve in a positive direction. It is also true that laws and their enforcement can degenerate whenever antipathies and prejudices override care and understanding. Even though the spiritual-cultural realm is not the place to create rights, it is obvious that the ethics and values

engendered there are crucial for the healthy functioning of democracy and government, even if we are only considering the human qualities necessary for being a worthy political representative.

The rights realm in a threefold society can be viewed as:

- Encompassed by recognizing and upholding rights through voting, legislation, and law enforcement, in addition to non-codified rights awareness and sensitivity such as civility and respect;
- Related to the soul function of feeling and its development, and laws about human relations that arise from the conditions of present earthly life;
- Based on the democratic principle of equality and the assertion of individual rights;
- Characterized by individual dignity, respect, and a sense of belonging to a valued community; and
- Balanced by individuals yielding to majority rule and the obligation to uphold the rights of others.

#### DISPLACEMENT, DEVELOPMENT, AND UNITY

Through a comprehension of the threefold social organism, we can understand that many legitimate motives and activities have become displaced from a sphere where they appropriately belong and then have become entrenched in another sphere where they do not. Whenever such displacements occur, social illness inevitably arises in some form or other. For instance, self-interested behavior and competition, appropriate for cultural life from a threefold perspective, are currently seen as the foundation of modern business and economic life. The inevitable consequences of this misplaced egoism and competition are an overemphasis on profit-making, along with human and environmental exploitation. Another example of social displacement is the idea that pluralism is appropriate in the political realm. Cultural, ethnic, and racial pluralism are hallmarks of a healthy spiritual-cultural life, but when such pluralism becomes the basis for political life, political factions and powerful lobby groups arise, and the democratic principle of individual equality is eroded.

If we take into consideration the development and evolution of the social organism as a whole, it should be obvious why Rudolf Steiner maintained that the social questions of our time are first and foremost issues of spiritual-cultural development. No meaningful change can occur economically or politically if, first and foremost, a people's ethics, morals, values, and capacities do not advance. In our age, all three spheres need to advance, but an independent spiritual-cultural realm needs to consciously develop most quickly. Humanity is suffering from the fact that the economic life has developed at a far faster rate than the other two spheres of social life. As a consequence, the economy has insufficient ethical and legal guidelines. To develop an economic life based on brotherhood or fellowship, it must be

recognized that the economy needs to accept as a given what the spiritual-cultural and the rights life develop and offer. As it is now, economic interests dominate and direct culture, including the education of children, and politics to serve their own needs. As long as they do so, the spiritual cultural life cannot foster and develop the spiritually creative forces and ideas needed to counter the one-sided, and consequently destructive, tendencies of economic life.

From all that has been said, it should be clear that at any given moment, even though engaged primarily in an activity associated with one sphere, people nonetheless are affected indirectly by and interact with the others. For example, ideally, wherever individuals are active in life, they continuously benefit from culturally derived capacities, are under the restriction and protection of the state, and are supported by the products and services provided by the economy in varying degrees. Thus, the unity of the threefold social organism lives in every individual and his or her actions.

#### IN SUMMARY

Just as a farm needs to be viewed as a living organism, so does the social organism and its sub-sectors, including the economy. All living organisms need to be rejuvenated. The biodynamic farm does this through such activities as making and applying biodynamic preparations and compost. Humanity can rejuvenate the economy and the social organism as a whole through an autonomous spiritual-cultural life and an educational system that enables the spiritually creative forces of each generation to develop and to be effectively applied in life.

In the next essay, we will move from considering the whole social organism to focusing on the economy. The main features of modern capitalism based on self-interest and competition will be contrasted with an associative economy based on collaboration and interdependence within the context of a threefold social organism. The fourth and final essay in the series will feature an organizational audit that can assist farms and businesses to work in harmony with the principles of associative economics and the threefold nature of social life.

#### NOTES

1. Raymond G. Fuller, "New Scheme of Social Organism," in Rudolf Steiner, *Threefold Social Organism, and Christianity* (Loma Mar, CA: Institute for Social Renewal, 2006), 3.

2. Examples of founders or activists in various fields influenced by Steiner's philosophical and social ideals are Trauger Groh and community supported agriculture, Robert Swann and community land trusts, the Triodos Bank and ethical banking, the RSF Social Finance and community investment, Christoph Meier and fair trade, Christian Gelleri and complementary currencies, C. Otto Scharmer and organizational development, Claus Sproll and the Green Party, Gary Lamb and educational freedom and school choice, Paul Scharff and Gerald Karnow and medical freedom, and the Fellowship Community and Camphill Villages and communities for the elderly and people with special needs.

3. See Joannes W. Rohen, *Functional Morphology: The Dynamic Wholeness of the Human Organism* (Hillsdale, NY: Adonis Press, 2007).

4. See Rudolf Steiner, "Lecture 3," *Education as Force for Social Change* (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1997).

Gary Lamb has been a student of Rudolf Steiner's social ideas for thirty-five years. He has management experience in for-profit and not-for-profit organizations, including Weleda, Inc., Hawthorne Valley Farm, Hawthorne Valley School, and the Social Renewal Foundation. He was a founder and managing editor of *The Threefold Review*, a magazine that focused on Steiner's social ideas. Currently, he is a founding board member of the Institute for Social Renewal (ISR), an independent think tank, and the Education Alliance for Children in New York State (TEACH NYS), a political advocacy organization promoting school choice legislation in New York. Gary has written two books, *The Social Mission of Waldorf Education* and *Wellsprings of the Spirit*, and compiled a research monograph, *Independent Schools and School Choice Legislation in the United States*, which are available from AWSNA Publications.

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