

RUDOLF STEINER'S SOCIAL IDEAS

or

ARE WE READY FOR COMMON SENSE?

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to offer a creative way of approaching our social problems. This is not an abstract program to be implemented, but rather seed ideas and principles to contemplate. These ideas were offered by Rudolf Steiner in 1917 when he was asked how society could be re-built in Germany so that the horrors of World War I would never be repeated. Rudolf Steiner's book *The Threefold Commonwealth** was translated into English and thoughtfully reviewed by the New York Times on January 14, 1923 as "the most original contribution [to sociological literature] in generations." What came to be known as the Threefold Social Movement was strong and hopeful for a couple of years.

However, when President Wilson's Fourteen Points were adopted as the program to reorganize Europe, ethnic and nationalist interests became entrenched and Steiner's cooperative approach became impossible to implement on a large scale. Not enough people could "think outside the box" to imagine the radical changes that would be necessary -- the time was not yet right. Steiner's response to this situation was to focus on a new approach to education (now known as Waldorf education) that did not merely aim to fill children with information to perpetuate the status quo, but rather sought to stimulate the children's capacity for independent thinking and creativity, so that future generations would indeed be able to grasp new ideas and bring about healthy changes in social life.

Although most of us have not had the good fortune to be educated in a Waldorf School, 100 years after the Threefold Movement was introduced many of its ideas have found their way into the minds of creative social thinkers, and there are numerous enterprises that have successfully put the threefold principles into practice. These include the movements for Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), Fair Trade, B Corps, and such initiatives as the Camphill communities, Mondragon, and GreenWave, to name but a few. Steiner foresaw that there would be another opening for these ideas to take hold on a larger scale in the 21st

century. People were not ready for them in his time – are we ready now? Can we afford not to be?

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Three Aspects of Social Life and the Wisdom and Tragic Misapplication of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity

Just as the human organism consists of the distinct but interdependent systems of 1) nerves and senses, 2) breathing and circulation, and 3) metabolism and limbs, the social organism consists of three distinct, interpenetrating sectors: **Culture**, the **Legal-Political System**, and the **Economy**. Cultural life includes art, education in the broadest sense, religion, and scientific inquiry. In its essential nature, political life comprises that aspect of society in which the rights of individuals are established by law and protected. And through the economic process the raw materials provided by nature are transformed by human labor and intelligence into needed products and services which are circulated and purchased.

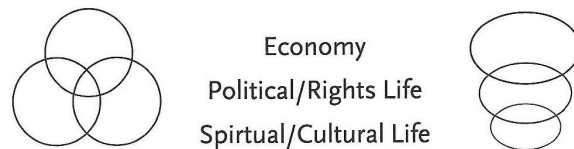
The famous ideals of the French Revolution, liberty, equality and fraternity, ring true, yet countless injustices have been perpetrated under their banners. With penetrating insight, Rudolf Steiner pointed out that the ideals of the French Revolution were indeed appropriate, but each one only within a specific aspect of social life. When they are employed as guidelines in the wrong sphere of life they become harmful.

Thus, liberty, or ***freedom*** is the healthy and correct guiding ideal for the **cultural/spiritual life**. In this realm, each individual is valued for his or her unique qualities and gifts. Through education, the innate potential of each should be developed. As ethical individuals, each can then contribute to the benefit of society.

In the **legal/political realm** of rights and justice, the guiding ideal is equality. In this realm each person should be guaranteed ***equal rights*** and through the democratic process choose representatives to define and safeguard these rights. **Government** should be limited to ensuring that the rights of citizens are upheld, with laws and regulations that apply to all. Since all humans equally need clean air, water and land, the protection of the environment should also fall under the purview of governmental responsibilities. On a smaller scale, this sphere has to do with the many agreements we make with one another as peers.

And ***collaboration*** or ***mutuality (brotherhood)*** should be the guiding principle for **economics**. Instead of self-interest, which sets people against one another in competition, associative arrangements among participants in all parts of the economic process can bring greater benefits to all.

Each of these spheres of life will benefit most from its own guiding principle and administrative body; and each sphere must not interfere with or encroach upon the others. Society can only thrive when the three spheres are in balance. The health of the whole society is dependent upon the discernment between culture, politics, and the economy. Administrative representatives of these three domains may come together to work out common goals in a manner similar to the diplomacy and collaboration that takes place between heads of state. Thus, each domain would have a sphere of autonomy and influence. A healthy social organism can be pictured as three intersecting circles of equal size. Currently, economic influences dominate the government and the cultural life, and the image is more like this:



A few examples of imbalance will bring further clarity:

Education of children belongs to the cultural sphere. But in America, the government has in recent times increasingly intervened in the actual curriculum and methods of teaching, overriding the freedom of teachers to act out of their own professional insight. Standardized testing does not have to do with better education for children but rather serves the textbook industry, and now the technology industry to be able to program uniformly throughout the country. The rapid infiltration of technology in schools is driven by the profit motive of the companies that provide the technological devices and services, even as educational research shows the tragic consequences in loss of attention span in children, and less impulse control due to the effects on their brains of continual screen stimulation and virtual instant gratification. Addiction of children to their screens and well-documented dangers to physical and psychological health have been downplayed and ignored in favor of the benefits to those who stand to profit.

Similarly, the sacred relationship between the doctor and patient, also belonging to the cultural sphere, has been all but eliminated by the combined profit-driven influences of the pharmaceutical and insurance industries. And for-profit hospitals that invest in expensive new equipment and technologies require their doctors to use them to repay their investment!

Short-sighted desire for profit in agriculture and the energy industries have polluted water, air and soil to the detriment of human and animal health far into the future. Once again, economic interests have lobbied publicly elected officials rather than submitting to law and regulations that would serve the common good.

Social and Anti-social Forces in Economic Life

Students are taught that the primary motive for economic activity is self-interest. When it goes beyond securing a wholesome lifestyle for oneself and one's dependents, self-interest easily becomes greed. This self-centered motivation is responsible for the vast income gap in our society, degradation of precious natural resources, wars, and excessive accumulation of wealth by a minority of people who exercise untrammelled power: misappropriated 'freedom' running rampant in the realm of the economy.

Steiner taught that the anti-social forces necessary for the evolutionary trend from group consciousness (tribe, clan, family, class, nationality, etc.) towards individuation would fragment society and isolate individuals unless social forces were consciously introduced as a balance. These social forces would need to be brought into the education of children; adults would need to learn to take greater interest in one another; and society would need to be arranged to counteract the negative impact of the increasing anti-social forces necessary for individuation. He articulated what he called a Fundamental Social Law – as objective as any law of physics:

“In a community of human beings working together, the well-being of the community will be the greater the less the individual claims for himself the proceeds of the work he has himself done, i.e., the more of these proceeds he shares with his fellow workers, and the more his own requirements are satisfied not out of his own work done, but out of the work done by others.”**

Any institutional arrangement that strives to manifest this basic social law, going beyond personal sentiment and conduct, will break the pattern of working solely for one's own benefit. It will engender gratitude for the work of others and foster collaboration in the workplace to focus on what was originally and should still be the primary motive for all economic activity, namely, to serve human needs. Fair prices for goods and services must be continually adjusted to enable all the workers in the supply chain to meet their needs so they can continue to be productive. (This is what Steiner called the “true price.”)

Within the various fields of economic life Steiner recommended that the impersonal, so-called “free market” be replaced by Associations in which producers, distributors and consumers work together to achieve greater efficiency, promote best practices, determine the level of production according to actual need, and establish fair prices. Because we have become far removed from the workers who produce what we purchase, it is necessary to develop imaginative thinking and empathy to picture and care about them, lest we unwittingly cause suffering in favor of bargain prices for ourselves. An economic system based on the collaborative principle has been called “Associative Economics.”

Our global economy has reached a scale in which rejuvenation can no longer be achieved through growth and merging. Now it is creative ideas (which arise from the cultural sphere) and appropriate use of money that will bring the economy forward.

In our current system, capital accumulates as private wealth and investment in land and the means of production (factories, machines, etc.). Steiner recommended that land and the means of production should become community assets. The land trust movement is a good example of the transfer of land out of personal ownership so it can be stewarded by those deemed most capable. This needs to be extended beyond land conservation. A similar model can be used for business enterprises, so when entrepreneurs cease to be active, the responsibility for leadership would go to the most capable people, who might or might not be family members of the previous leader. Steiner made the radical suggestion to eliminate absentee leadership of economic enterprises through investors whose only interest is to extract personal gain. All surpluses from economic endeavors [i.e. money available after the needs of the workers, including executives, are met according to mutually agreed upon amounts] should be directed towards necessary reinvestment in the endeavor and re-training of workers, and then to support of cultural life, education, and healthcare.

Steiner had an unusual approach to providing credit, namely, to offer people with special capacities and creative ideas full scope and access to resources to establish enterprises to produce goods and services that are wanted and needed. The appropriate economic Associations would act as foundations in this regard, while also providing loans.

Money, which replaced barter as a more efficient means of exchange and bookkeeping, is meant to circulate and not stagnate. Steiner suggested that it should undergo a process of aging, death and re-birth (re-issue) by being dated, so it would gradually lose value if it wasn't used. This idea was actually put into practice in the United States after the Great Depression to counteract hoarding and stimulate the economy! Since money is mostly electronic now, this approach would be quite feasible to implement. It is important to note that this concept was applied to liquid money (cash), not to loans or investments designed to return capital with interest or grow in value. Various experiments with this model have demonstrated increased circulation and, in economic terms, velocity of money.

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In conclusion: Are we ready for common sense?

As economic approaches, capitalism, communism and socialism all offer promises of prosperity. Communism champions equality in the economic realm but tends to devolve into governmental tyranny, corruption and inequality when state officials are entrusted with the power of distribution of wealth, land and the means of production. Socialism strives to guarantee that

the basic needs of citizens will be met by a benevolent government. However, the systems established in such areas as education and medical care tend to lack the excellence and originality that come from individual inspiration. A one-size-fits-all philosophy can lead to the government adopting policies which stifle and even vilify innovative, alternative approaches. We have already discussed the consequences of capitalism based on self-interest.

If we have grasped the wholesomeness of the idea of Associative Economics, will we work toward creating or supporting living models to replace the old economic paradigms? Can we work toward government that limits itself to protection of rights and resists unwarranted economic influences? Can we find ways to free scientific inquiry from funding sources that would prejudice outcomes? Can we find ways for education to be given back to parents and teachers, free from both governmental and economic influences while remaining accessible to all? Can we challenge the use of technology for young children in schools?

These are just a few areas of possible activity. As was said at the outset, Rudolf Steiner did not give a ready-made program to solve all of our problems, but if this brief and incomplete expression of his social ideas does make sense and inspire you, you will surely find colleagues in transforming that part of the world where destiny has placed you. Each person has decision-making power to collaborate with others, to form communities and organizations with like-minded people. Such communities will make connections with others, and in this way a movement for freedom in cultural life, equality of rights, and associative economics will grow organically into the future.

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* Now published under the title *Towards Social Renewal*

** Steiner, *Anthroposophy and the Social Question*, 1906

A bibliography of references can be found on the Stella Natura website www.stellanatura.com.