

Chapter 2

Rudolf Steiner as Social Reformer and Activist

Although his public efforts as a social reformer and activist occurred mainly between 1917 and 1922, the roots of Rudolf Steiner's activism are found in his early philosophical work, *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path: A Philosophy of Freedom*, first published in German in 1894 when he was 33 years old. In it he addresses the question of free will: "Is a human being spiritually free, or subject to iron necessity of purely natural law?"⁵ According to Steiner, attaining free will is a moral process in which a person progresses toward higher and higher states of self-awareness, self-control, and self-directed will. In *Intuitive Thinking* he describes this process as an inner path of development achieved through a rigorous training and refining of individual thinking. The aim of this striving for freedom he calls ethical individualism—an individualism that is permeated with social awareness and responsibility. Thus we can see early in Steiner's work the importance he places on inner transformation and the development of higher-order faculties as a foundation for outer effort on behalf of social renewal.

From 1899 to 1904, Steiner taught at the Berlin Workers College, a school for men and women from the working class, started by Wilhelm Liebknecht, an associate of Karl Marx. Although not a supporter of Marxism, Steiner quickly became one of the most popular teachers at the college. He was eventually forced to leave by the leaders of the college against the wishes

of the students. The main factor in his dismissal was his unremitting support of human freedom, which clashed with the school's Marxist ideology.

In 1905 and 1906, Steiner began speaking and writing about the Fundamental Social Law.⁶ This law is the foundation of all of his later writings and lectures on economics. He describes it as an ancient spiritual tenet that has the same validity as the laws of nature.⁷ One way to characterize the Fundamental Social Law is as follows:

The more a person works for the benefit of the community, and the more the community is structured to provide for the needs of each individual, the greater the well-being of the whole community will be.

A main corollary to this law is that human suffering caused by social institutions is a result of egoism, and the more people work out of self-interest or egoism, the more poverty, want, and suffering will be introduced into social life somewhere, sometime. This, of course, is in stark contradiction to a central principle of the modern capitalist market economy: The more people work out of self-interest, the more productive they will be and, consequently, the more prosperous society will be as a whole. It is important to note, however, that Steiner's interpretation of the Fundamental Social Law is in no way comparable with traditional interpretations of socialism, as we will see.

While not outwardly active as a social reformer from 1906 to 1917, he did engage in activities that were aimed at strengthening cultural life through the spiritual science he developed, known as Anthroposophy.⁸ He created new artistic methods for the visual and performing arts and for architecture. He also gave numerous lectures on a modern spiritual-scientific interpretation of Christianity.

Another important activity during this time period was his study of the human body as an expression of soul and spirit. This led to his insights into the threefold nature of the human organism and, in turn, to an understanding of the threefold nature of the social organism. He maintains that in striving

to understand how the human organism consists of the dynamics and interrelations of the three primary systems—nerve-sense, rhythmic, and metabolic—we can develop thinking helpful for understanding the dynamics of social organism.⁹

In 1917, near the end of World War I, Rudolf Steiner was approached by a German diplomat, Otto von Lerchenfeld, who asked him what could be done after the war ended to prevent similar cataclysms in the future. Steiner responded with a description of the inherent threefold nature of social life and the appropriate function and jurisdiction of the three main sectors—economics, culture, and politics—and how they need to relate to each other if there is to be any hope for lasting peace in the world. A small but determined group of people quickly took up these suggestions as a real solution to human exploitation, civil strife, and political warfare. They helped distribute to leading officials in Germany and Austria memoranda written by Steiner describing the main features of a threefold social organism as the foundation for bringing about cultural and social renewal in Central Europe.¹⁰ Although some high ranking officials thought that these innovative ideas had merit, they were too entrenched in old ways of operating politically to take them up for systemic change.

The supporters of social threefolding worked with Steiner on many different fronts. In addition to their political efforts, they formed an association to promote threefold ideas to the public and industry. This operated like a think tank, publishing a journal and sponsoring trained speakers who were versed in social threefolding. Steiner himself gave hundreds of lectures on social threefolding in venues ranging from barrooms and factories to concert halls.¹¹ He maintained that all three of the main spheres of social life—culture, law, and the economy—were of vital importance, and no one of them should dominate or control the others. One effort to reach the general public was his appeal, “To the German People and the Civilized World.” It was endorsed by well-known personalities at the time and inserted in leading newspapers in

Germany in 1919. Also in 1919 he published a book on social threefolding, *Towards Social Renewal*, which became a best seller in Germany.¹²

In 1920 Steiner helped set up two corporations, Futurum Konzern AG in Switzerland and Der Kommende Tag (The Coming Day: A Shareholder Corporation for Furthering Economic and Spiritual Values) in Germany. They were meant to be organizational forms for generating revenue for cultural initiatives such as schools and research laboratories.

By 1922 most efforts by Steiner and his colleagues ceased to publicly promote social threefolding. As the World War receded into the background, hyperinflation in Germany, misapprehension by labor union officials, and the tendency to revert to old thought habits all contributed to the relatively short-lived interest in Steiner's social ideas outside the circle of people who valued his insights in other areas.

Nevertheless, there still exist today important initiatives founded during that time period as part of the threefold efforts. One example is the Waldorf school movement. In 1919, Emil Molt, an industrialist and enthusiastic supporter of Rudolf Steiner's social ideas, asked Steiner to help him start a school for the children of the workers of the Waldorf Astoria cigarette factory in Stuttgart, Germany, which he managed. The School was part of the *Coming Day* experiment and received significant financial support through it. Molt envisaged the Waldorf School as an example of an independent cultural endeavor that would spearhead the elevation of cultural life and the liberation of education from state control. Molt's and Steiner's aim was to establish an independent school as free as possible from onerous state regulations, which was accessible to families regardless of their financial circumstances.¹³ There are now over a thousand Waldorf or Rudolf Steiner schools worldwide. Another important business that was part of the Futurum AG that still exists today is the Weleda AG, a private corporation based in Switzerland and global manufacturer of cosmetics and natural remedies with annual sales of over \$300 million.

In 1922, within a few weeks of each other, Steiner made two other noteworthy efforts to expound his social ideas. The first was a series of 14 lectures given in Switzerland on the fundamentals of economics.¹⁴ Instead of addressing social issues from the macro social level of a threefold social organism, he focused on the economic sphere to an audience comprised mainly of economic students. In these lectures he expanded his thoughts on the Fundamental Social Law and social threefolding. He also characterized the economy as a self-enclosed world system; distinguished the differing natures of loan, purchase, and gift money; and elucidated the benefits of replacing an impersonal market with a market coordinated by producer, distributor, and consumer associations. We will look more closely at these themes in upcoming chapters.

The other effort, in Britain, was a series of talks at a conference titled “Spiritual Values in Education and Social Life” at Manchester College, Oxford.¹⁵ In these he stated that his book *Towards Social Renewal*, which had been a best seller in Germany, was now almost forgotten because hyperinflation had thwarted most efforts to implement social threefolding ideas. Even so, he felt people in the Western world could benefit greatly from the implementation of social threefolding ideals. Interestingly, relatively soon afterward favorable reviews of the English translation of *Towards Social Renewal* began to appear in the United States and Britain. An economist in a 1923 *New York Times* book review praised it as “the most original contribution in a generation” to sociological literature. The reviewer went on to say:

The author ... has addressed himself to social problems from an unusual point of view, producing the highly interesting conception of the Threefold Commonwealth. ...Most of our books on social maladjustment and the future of civilization are based on either economic or psychological interpretation; Dr. Steiner has what may be called a spiritual interpretation and he would reorganize society in such a way as to bring it into conformity with spiritual realities.¹⁶

In the same year, a Christian theologian, W.F. Lofthouse, who attended Steiner's lectures at Oxford, wrote a review of Steiner's writings in *The London Quarterly Review*. Like the American economist just quoted, Lofthouse praised his spiritual perspective on social problems:

An outsider, strolling into the Oxford lecture room last August ... might not have suspected that he was listening to the author of [*Towards Social Renewal*], perhaps the most widely-read of all books on politics appearing since the war ...

He has offers and hopes for all sides of life. ... Steiner has a definite system of ideas and an array of positive aims, clear, synthetic (as he would say) and spiritual. ...

And yet he is interested, not in many things, but one. 'Synthesis' is his watchword. Every demand and, still more, every response is to be correlated with every other. A comprehensive view of the world and of man is what the times require, a principle to be applied to all personal and social activities. If this can be found, it will be possible to produce a definite social program, both political and religious.¹⁷

Steiner never relinquished his insistence on the importance of social threefolding even though it was not taken up in any significant way during his lifetime. Shortly before his death in 1925, he stated that all initiatives that are a part of the Anthroposophical Society, which fosters the spiritual-scientific worldview that he developed, should strive to promote social threefolding even if the rest of the world was rejecting it.¹⁸

All public efforts in the direction of a threefold social organism had to cease in Germany around 1935 and throughout World War II because the National Socialists considered it a threat to their nationalist views and aims. It wasn't until the 1970s and 1980s that diverse alternative movements in various locations began to take up threefold ideas with significant albeit local impact.