



## CHAPTER 1

### THE THREEFOLD NATURE OF SOCIAL LIFE

*The movement for the threefold social [organism] strives for the complete disassociation of the educational system from government and industry.<sup>3</sup>*

– Rudolf Steiner

In 1917, Otto von Lerchenfeld, a member of the Bavarian State Council in Germany was in despair over the World War that was taking place. He decided to ask Rudolf Steiner for his opinion on what it would take to restore order and create a lasting peace. Von Lerchenfeld was familiar with Anthroposophy and was hoping some new ideas could come from this all-encompassing spiritual perspective. He was not disappointed. Over a three-week period Steiner laid out for von Lerchenfeld his thoughts on the World War and what needed to be done to avoid further violence and social upheaval. Steiner maintained that both capitalism and socialism were based on outdated ideas that did not take into consideration a complete view of reality. Neither capitalism, based on self-interested behavior and the impersonal market, nor socialism, which thwarts individual creativity and efficiency, could provide the foundation for a lasting peace.

Steiner described in detail to von Lerchenfeld how there are three primary aspects inherent in social life: the economy, the political-legal or rights life, and spiritual-cultural life. Each of these spheres or realms, if rightly organized, should have its own basis, dynamics, scope of action, function, and even administration. All

three realms should be viewed as being of equal importance to the others, and each realm relates to the others in specific ways. Steiner maintained that one of the primary causes of modern social upheavals is the chaotic intermingling of the three realms in what he called the *unitary state*. The most significant modern-day example of one sphere inappropriately intruding upon another is that of big business using economic power to influence the creation of laws and regulations to suit its purposes without proper regard for human rights or the environment. Another example, which will be covered in some depth later, is the combined effort of big business and the state to form and control education, a cultural matter, to benefit their interests.

The proper scope of action for economic life is the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services. A healthy economy requires individual initiative, efficiency, and technical expertise. Steiner maintained that economic decisions should no longer be left to unregulated market forces, as in capitalism, nor given over to the state, as in socialism, but should be decided in economic associations that include actual participants in the economy from all three sectors: production, distribution, and consumption. He maintained that we are at the point in human evolution when the economy must be taken consciously in hand by those active in it who operate out of social needs or concern for others rather than self-interest. This altruistic approach can be called *brotherhood* or human fellowship, which is based on cooperation and collaboration.

The activity of the political or legal sphere should be limited to recognizing and upholding human rights, including those related to personal safety and security and the protection of the environment. Here the principle of *equality* should prevail in the decision-making processes. The scope of action of a political state, based on democracy<sup>4</sup> and majority rule, should be limited to those decisions that every competent adult is capable of understanding and acting upon. This would preclude the political state from making business decisions

or decisions that involve personal views, such as religious beliefs, nutritional preferences, and medical and educational choices. In a healthy social life individuals and organizations directing economic and cultural activities would take democratically determined rights as a given. Quite the reverse perspective has become the norm in modern life—for instance, when the political state takes economic interests as a given when creating laws. The ultimate modern-day manifestation of this type of reversal is exemplified by the World Trade Organization's power to overrule existing laws of the world's nation-states and their inherent political communities, and even to influence or stop the creation of new legislation.

The spiritual-cultural realm includes everything connected with education and human development, including science, art, and religion. This realm is intimately related to the unique nature of each individual person and what is commonly called private life. Consequently, the fundamental basis for a spiritual-cultural sphere can only be individual *freedom*. According to Steiner, an independent cultural life would continually supply the other spheres with creative forces of spiritual renewal, something it cannot do if it is subject to the dictates of business and political interests wanting to perpetuate existing arrangements. The most significant value-forming area of spiritual-cultural life is the entire field of education, which from a threefold perspective should be independent of political and economic influences in the same way, as is commonly acknowledged, that religion should be free from their control.

The basis of each of the three spheres—spiritual-cultural, political, and economic—is revealed by the slogan of the French revolution: *Freedom, Equality, and Brotherhood*. In such a threefold arrangement, the unity of the social organism comes about through each individual, since everyone lives in all three spheres at any given moment. It also can come about by representatives from each of the three spheres meeting to discuss and reach agreements on common

concerns, such as education, in a similar manner to the way heads of state meet, make agreements, sign treaties, and so on.<sup>5</sup>

Following Steiner's explanation of the threefold nature of social life to von Lerchenfeld, there were numerous efforts by enthusiasts to introduce these ideas to the ruling powers of Europe at the end of World War I. Steiner wrote a memorandum about threefolding that was circulated to significant political figures. Petitions drawn up in support of the social ideas outlined by Steiner were displayed in large advertisements in the major European newspapers. Steiner also lectured widely to all types of audiences, ranging from a few patrons of local smoke-filled taverns to audiences of several thousand union workers. In 1919, Steiner published the book *Towards Social Renewal*, which became a best-seller in Germany. It was soon translated into English and favorably reviewed in the *New York Times* newspaper. Unfortunately, after about three years following the war, when people were at least open to considering new social ideas, the old thought forms prevailed, and attempts to gain widespread recognition for the threefold nature of social life ceased. Steiner and his supporters then focused their efforts on smaller projects such as The Coming Day holding company in Germany, the Futurum enterprise in Switzerland, the Waldorf School in Stuttgart, efforts to start a World School Association, the refounding of the Anthroposophical Society, and lecturing to economists.<sup>6</sup> In principle, Steiner never gave up trying to harmonize the initiatives he was responsible for with the threefold nature of social life. He adjusted his strategy on how, when, and where to introduce these ideas according to the human capabilities of those involved, and the opportunities and challenges that presented themselves in outer life.

Since the principal dynamics of a threefold social organism are integrated and have to do with the arrangement of the whole of social life, it is not possible for a solitary organization to manifest all the principles of a threefold social organism or to be threefolded.

Only when, in a given geographic region, enough individuals and organizations working in all three realms of life —cultural, political, and economic— harmonize their actions in line with threefold principles, will it be possible to have the requisite cooperation necessary to establish the beginnings of a threefold social organism. Although one can observe numerous worthy initiatives and movements taking place now, the necessary convergence of separate efforts has not developed to the point that a threefold organism can emerge.

This does not mean, however, that individuals and organizations should not try to gain an understanding of threefold principles and harmonize their actions as far as possible with them. Indeed, human evolution depends upon such efforts; all great social movements begin with individual actions.

We are at a stage of development when many social movements have matured to a significant degree but often are working separately. These movements include community supported agriculture, organic foods, community land trusts, sustainable communities, living wage, socially responsible investing and philanthropy, fair trade, intentional communities, alternative medicine, Waldorf education, biodynamic agriculture, permaculture,<sup>7</sup> and so on. It is entirely possible that a tremendous leap forward, a spiritual counterforce to materialistic tendencies, could take place if activists from the various movements would consciously strive to understand Steiner's social thoughts and use them to develop common ideals and strategies.

Steiner was one of the first persons to elaborate the threefold nature of modern social life to any significant degree. However, social life is now commonly portrayed as consisting of three main sectors. Some of the more recent proponents of a three-sector society are former Democratic New Jersey Senator Bill Bradley, David Korten, the anti-globalist author and activist, and the socialist-leaning professors and authors from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato. These thinkers subscribe to the same basic modern threefold characterization consisting of a market

economy, political government, and civil society. Thus far, however, their characterizations have little correlation to Steiner's perspective in theory or practical application even though there may be a similar striving for social improvement. The fact that a threefold characterization of society has become commonplace has, to a certain degree, vindicated Steiner's visionary insights into social life.<sup>8</sup>