

PART TWO: THE THREEFOLD NATURE OF SOCIAL LIFE AND ASSOCIATIVE ECONOMICS

Chapter 4

The Threefold Nature of Social Life

We as a global society are confronted with three root questions. I find these root questions alive in the hearts and minds of people across various cultures and civilizations. They are:

1. How can we create a more equitable global economy that would serve the needs of all, including today's have-nots and future generations?
2. How can we deepen democracy and evolve our political institutions so that all people can increasingly directly participate in the decision-making processes that shape their context and future?
3. How can we renew our culture so that every human being is considered a carrier of a sacred project—the journey of becoming one's authentic self?³¹

– C. Otto Scharmer, *Theory U*

The cultural principles of Earth Community affirm the spiritual unity and interconnectedness of Creation. ... The economic principles of Earth Community affirm the basic right of every person to a means of livelihood and responsibility of each person to live in a balanced relationship with their place on Earth without expropriating the resources of others. ... The political principles of Earth Community affirm the inherent worth and potential of all individuals and their right to a voice in the decisions that shape their lives, thereby favoring inclusive citizen engagement, cooperative problem solving, and restorative justice.³²

– David Korten, *The Great Turning:
From Empire to Earth Community*

As noted in Chapter 2, Rudolf Steiner's work with social threefolding ideas began at the close of World War I in Germany. He 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: culture, rights, and economics. Intimations of this threefold nature of society can be found in the 18th century slogan of the French Revolution: *Liberty, Egalité, Fraternité*. It is now quite common to find politicians, economists, and sociologists speaking about a three-part society. The quotes above by C. Otto Scharmer, the well-known lecturer at MIT and organizational consultant, and David Korten, a prominent author in the field of alternative economics, attest to this fact.

The question for the future is not so much whether society is threefold but what form of threefold society humanity will bring. The current reality is a three-sectored world order with financial interests and economic life represented by a very limited number of powerful people dominating politics and cultural life. In contrast, both Scharmer and Korten suggest a more balanced threefolding that honors the freedom and rights of all people and the importance of all three aspects of society, which is consistent with Steiner's perspective.³³

It is important to understand that for Steiner social threefolding is not an outer structure or world order to be imposed onto people and institutions; rather, threefolding is inherent in the nature of social life. It is a formative element that is trying to emerge out of social life itself. Through conscious effort this inner nature now needs to find expression in our social structures and systems in ways that are appropriate and socially healthy in the various regions of the earth.

The Threefold Human Being

As we have seen, before Rudolf Steiner introduced his ideas on the threefold social organism and what has come to be known as 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 comprehensive understanding of these complexities that he felt ready to speak about social life. Steiner maintained that this understanding is essential because our outer social structures need to reflect our essence as human beings and our relation to the world. Understanding the human being as a spiritually-imbued living organism can help us to think in a new way about society as a spiritually-imbued social organism.³⁴

Steiner describes that physiologically there are three main systems of contrasting activity in the human body: a nerve-sense system centered in the head region, a rhythmic system centered in the mid-region, and the metabolic limb system centered mainly in the lower region and extremities of the body.³⁵ These three physiological systems that are centered in specific bodily regions nevertheless extend throughout the whole human organism, intertwining and interacting with each other. The proper functioning of each system is dependent on the health and vitality of the other systems and how well they relate to each other. If one system 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 can occur. Or, if nerve sense activity becomes too strong in the metabolism, ulcers can arise.

With the image of the threefold human being as a background, we will now consider some of the main features of a threefold social organism as expressed by Rudolf Steiner.

The Threefold Social Organism:

Balancing Autonomy and Interdependence

The three spheres of culture, rights, and economy can be viewed as three distinct areas 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 instance, when powerful economic interest groups

dominate our rights, democracy is undermined and becomes diseased. Or, when the political state intrudes on personal liberty, our cultural life becomes impotent.

It is helpful to depict the threefold social organism as three intersecting circles, each representing one of the three main realms of society (see Illustration 1). A simplified image of what in reality is an exceedingly complex living organism, it nonetheless provides a useful starting point for understanding the threefold nature of social life.

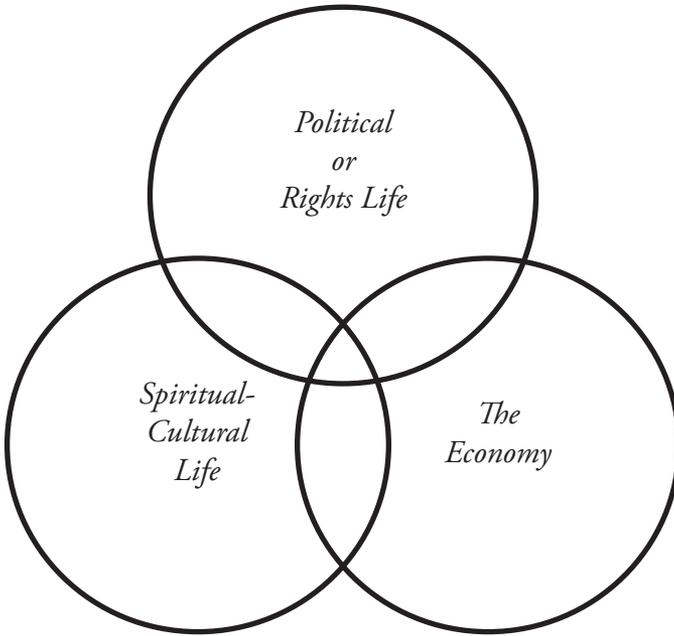


Illustration 1—The Three Spheres of a Threefold Social Organism

Each of these realms is essential for a healthy social life. Like the three physiological systems in the human body, each has distinct yet interdependent functions. Consistent with this perspective, each realm needs to have its own independent administration and governing bodies, and none should dominate or intrude on the others in an inappropriate way. Unfortunately,

today, economic interests and economic thinking dominate both the political and cultural realms, including education, and are a primary cause of much of the exploitation and injustice that occurs in the world.³⁶

It is essential for the future development of a healthy social life that each sphere be enabled to fulfill its vital function. The function of the spiritual-cultural life, which includes education in the broadest sense, is to foster the full development of each human being, from outer practical skills to the highest moral and social virtues. It follows from this fact that an independent cultural life needs to be based on individual freedom. The function of a healthy political or rights sphere is to foster human relations by recognizing and upholding human rights and maintaining safety and security. Its foundation therefore should be democracy and equality. And finally, the function of the economy from a threefold perspective is to provide for the earthly and spiritual needs of human beings.³⁷ Its proper basis is altruism or concern for others and society as a whole.

This characterization of the three realms not only represents Steiner's thinking but also is an image of what we can see arising through the efforts of many alternative economic and social justice movements around the world, as is explained in later chapters.³⁸

We will now consider briefly each of the three sectors, and how they need to relate to each other in order to achieve maximum social health.

Spiritual-Cultural Life

The primary purpose of the spiritual or cultural realm is to foster to the greatest possible extent the development of the innate capacities that each person brings into earthly life. This will ultimately lead to an understanding of the meaning and purpose of life and our relation to nature and the world.

This development comprises everything from intellectual abilities, artistic capacities, and moral qualities to practical job skills. Education in the broadest sense, including the fields of science, art, and religion, is the primary

arena of cultural life. From a spiritual perspective, the highest goals for these fields, respectively, are scientific truth, artistic beauty, and moral goodness. The possibility for world peace depends on the development of these three virtues to the greatest possible degree within each human being and on the degree to which these virtues are able to influence economic and political life.

If we take seriously and do not just give lip service to our recognition of a unique spiritual essence in every individual, then we must ensure that society fosters activities and institutions wherein this aspect of the human being can develop out of its own spiritual nature and laws—not the nature and laws that apply to business and political life. These activities and institutions would include schools, places of worship, care facilities, research labs, theatres, art galleries, festival celebrations, family homes—in short, any educational, cultural, or social activity intended to manifest human creativity or self-expression.

Such institutions and activities cannot fulfill their unique function of enabling the development of spiritual potential if they are directed primarily by political or economic interests and thinking. These have validity in their own realms, but must not be the primary shapers of cultural life.

Thus, an authentic independent cultural life will have much to offer for the growth of a healthy economic and political life: moral strength and social understanding; artistic sensitivity and imaginative creativity; and practical skills and love of meaningful work. It is only through individuals with fully developed creative capacities, vitality, and a strong sense of fellowship that rejuvenating spiritual forces can enter into social life as a whole. These are also the very forces that can counterbalance the socially destructive nature of an economic life devoid of ethical impulses.

Individuals are of little service to themselves or to the world if they do not strive to develop their latent capacities. In this sense, self-interest and individualism are legitimate starting points for spiritual-cultural life. However, the demand for ever greater individual freedom in social life needs to be balanced by a growing sense of responsibility for the welfare of others

and tolerance for other people's perspectives. In going beyond personal desires and needs to include the needs of others, we can avoid one-sided individualism and irresponsible behavior. In an independent spiritual-cultural sphere free from coercive economic and political interests, social awareness and responsibility can be added to the initial egoistic motivation for self-development.

How one goes about his or her personal development and education should be the free decision of each adult or the concern of parents or guardians on behalf of their children until they reach adulthood. Freedom and self-determination are the essential principles of a healthy spiritual-cultural life. This includes personal decisions concerning education, religion, nutrition, and medicine.

Steiner maintains that not only self-interest but also competition can appropriately operate in the spiritual-cultural aspect of life. For example, a provider of any type of cultural service—a teacher, for instance—needs to “compete” or win the appreciation of potential families who might send their children to the school where the teacher is engaged. The social conditions necessary for such healthy competition in the cultural realm, including the fields of education, health care, and religion, are individual and professional freedom of thought, freedom of choice, opportunity to be fully informed, and sufficient financial resources on the part of patrons and consumers to access their choices.

With regard to the three soul functions—thinking, feeling, and willing—Steiner suggests that the starting point in the spiritual-cultural development in modern culture is thinking. We need to expand and deepen our normally abstract thinking and our understanding of others in order to enhance and refine our feelings and purposefully direct our will.

In summary, the main function of the spiritual-cultural realm in a healthy threefold social organism is to enable the full development of each individual's capacities.

An authentic cultural life is:

- comprised of education in the broadest sense, including science, art, and religion;
- based on individual freedom, including freedom of thought, choice, expression, and association;
- related initially to self-interested behavior, the soul function of thinking, and the development of innate capacities;
- characterized by individualism and competition; which in turn is
- balanced by the conscious cultivation of tolerance and a love that leads to concern for others, and the development of capacities for being of service to society.

Economic Life

The primary purpose of economic life is to meet the earthly and spiritual needs of human beings in a way that respects the spiritual dimension of the human being and nature. Rudolf Steiner recommends gradually replacing the impersonal market, which is based on self-interested behavior and competition, with collaborating associations of producers, distributors, and consumers that will make informed decisions out of mutual interest. Thus, the term associative economics has come to be connected to Steiner's economic ideas although he never used the term himself.³⁹

From the perspective of a threefold social organism, the initial motivation in economic life is not self-interest and individualism, as in a healthy cultural life, but rather altruism—caring for others. This becomes manifest through collective or group decision-making processes by those actively involved in economic life. This fact in no way contradicts the importance of entrepreneurial creativity and individual initiative in the economy. Through economic associations, creative entrepreneurs gain awareness of the consequences of their intentions and actions; individualism can thus better serve the wider interests of the community.

Through these trans-sector associations the actual participants in the economic process at hand (or their representatives, depending on the size

and scope of the associations) will make decisions, such as determination of quantities to be produced, pricing, allocation of resources, and quality standards. More will be said about trans-sector economic associations in Chapter 8. The directing of the economic process by associations should not be misconstrued as centralized planning in a socialist sense. Rather, economic planning and decisions are made by freely-formed groups of people who are actually involved in economic life, ranging from the local all the way to the international level.

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 the development of thinking, economic activity—producing goods and services for others—is rooted in the soul element of will. Moreover, whereas cultural life cultivates innate capacities brought 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 materialistic 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, providing services, and so on. In order to prosper, such activities need technical expertise, efficiency, and the intelligent division of labor. While 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 innovative and efficient manner, based on these collective insights.

Therefore, we can view a socially responsible economic life as:

- comprised of the associations of producers, distributors, and consumers that support all three spheres—cultural, rights, and economic;
- related to the soul function of willing and to the kind of work that meets material and spiritual needs of human beings;
- based on altruism, caring for others and the environment, and the soul attitude of fellowship, all of which carry on into the future;
- characterized by private initiative and entrepreneurship;
- balanced by cooperation, collaboration, and interdependence.

Rights Life

We now consider the middle realm that weaves between cultural life and economic activity: the realm of human rights, politics, and law. Here the main focus of activity is not personal development (as in cultural life) or working efficiently (as in economic life) but rather on healthy and just human relations. The aim and emphasis in the rights life is the forming of guiding principles for the conduct of our affairs in all types of life situations and activities. These guiding principles involve, for example, fairness, respect, and civility, and they range from personal standards of conduct, or self-government, to legally codified proscriptions, agreements, public health and safety regulations (including environmental protection), and physical security. Ideally, political and legal decisions are determined democratically and should be applied in a consistent fashion to all three realms.

In a healthy threefold society, equality is the prevailing ideal and guide in the rights realm, just as individualism and uniqueness hold sway in cultural life, and collaboration and efficient production are the foundation of economic life. The experience of equality as a member of a democratic society in the realm of rights is essential for human dignity and self-worth, regardless of a person's race, gender, religion, ethnicity, cultural capacities, occupation, position in a community, and so on.

In an appropriately organized, democratically-based political state, we are continually oscillating between self-interested behavior and a concern for

others and for the greater community. Wanting a say and asserting one's rights are expressions of self-interest. At the same time, as a democratic citizen, I am obligated to ensure that other people's rights are upheld, and to yield to the decision of the majority once all voices have been heard.

The establishing of rights is related to the soul function of feeling. How people feel about each other and about the various groups within their community is reflected not only in the laws that are created, but also in how the laws are applied and enforced. To the degree that members of a democratic society ennoble their feelings toward their fellow human beings, laws will evolve in a positive direction. Laws and their enforcement can degenerate if antipathies and prejudices override care and understanding. Thus it becomes obvious that while an independent spiritual-cultural realm is not the place to create rights, it is needed to engender the ethics and values that are crucial for the healthy functioning of democracy and government.

The rights realm in a threefold society is:

- comprised of recognizing and upholding human rights through voting, legislation, and law enforcement, as well as non-codified social awareness and qualities such as civility and respect;
- related to human relationships and the soul function of feeling and the need for its continual refinement;
- based on the democratic principle of equality for all;
- balanced by individuals yielding to majority rule and the obligation to uphold the rights of others;
- characterized by dignity, respect, and a sense of each person being an equal and worthy member of a community.

Social Imbalances: Displacement, Intrusion, and Rates of Development

By gaining an understanding of the threefold nature of social life, we can develop the ability to diagnose the root causes of social illness and also to prescribe an effective remedy for either a chronic or an acute situation. We can, for instance, understand the extent to which motives and activities in our society have become displaced from a sphere where they are legitimate

and appropriate to another sphere where they are not. Whenever such displacements occur, social illness inevitably arises in some form or other. For example, self-interested behavior and competition, appropriate for cultural life from a threefold perspective, are currently entrenched as the foundation of modern business and economic life. The inevitable consequences of this misplaced egoism and competition are excessive greed and human and environmental exploitation.

The intrusion of the interests of one sphere into another is the root cause of many of our social ills. In particular, economic interests today dominate nearly every aspect of life to the detriment of the whole. Corporate interest groups and lobbyists (economy) virtually control our U.S. Congress (politics); the rulings of the World Trade Organization (economy) take precedence over the laws of nation-states (politics); and big business (economy) dictates federal education reform (politics and culture), to mention a few examples.

It should be apparent why Rudolf Steiner maintains that the social problems of our time are first and foremost issues of spiritual-cultural development. No meaningful change can occur economically or politically if ethics, morals, values, and capacities do not advance to an equal degree. In our age, all three spheres need to advance, but the swift development of an independent spiritual-cultural realm is of primary importance. 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 guidance from the cultural and political sectors. The economy needs to be guided by and assimilate what the spiritual-cultural and the rights life develop and offer if it is to attain the character of altruism and fellowship. This means, for example, that economic interests should no longer be allowed to use their financial power to obstruct or weaken legitimate environmental regulations and laws or to dictate education reform. As long as this domination occurs, the spiritual-cultural life cannot foster the spiritually creative forces and ideas needed to counter the one-sided, hence destructive tendencies inherent in economic life.

At any given moment people are affected by and participate in all three spheres, regardless of the sphere in which they are primarily engaged. Wherever individuals are active in social life, they are at the same time continuously benefiting from their culturally-derived capacities, are under the restriction and protection of the democratic state, and are supported by the products and services provided by the economy. Thus, the unity of the threefold social organism expresses itself in every individual life.