

# **Rudolf Steiner's Social Theory: How the Waldorf schools arose from the Threefold Social Order.**

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The question of whether education should be concerned primarily with developing the individual person or emphasise service to society is as old as Western education itself. This paper explores the question from three perspectives beginning with a broad but brief view encompassing the history of Liberal education. Within this perspective some educators like Socrates have placed greater emphasis on the pursuit of truth and the development of individual character, while others like Quintilian have stressed the importance of virtue and public service, thereby establishing the terms of a debate that has persisted throughout the history of education until today. The second perspective narrows the field by focusing on the views of the "individualists" and the "social educators" in the progressive education movement in the late nineteenth and the first third of the twentieth century. The third perspective, and major emphasis of this paper, is that arising from Rudolf Steiner's social theory. The implications of his Threefold Social Order for education in general and for Waldorf schools in particular will be examined in greater detail.

## **The perspective of Liberal education**

In the education systems of the Western world debates occur periodically about quality in various aspects of the primary, secondary or tertiary education sectors. But a perennial concern is the confusion over the purposes of education at any level. In a masterly work on the history of the idea of Liberal education, Bruce Kimball argues that within the Liberal education tradition there have been two fundamental streams, which he calls the *philosophical* and *oratorical* traditions.<sup>1</sup> The former emphasises the ideal of the educated person as the philosopher who pursues knowledge for its own sake having no other end in view than the development of individual potential. The latter's emphasis is on the orator, who seeks virtue for the sake of serving the good of the community, state or nation. The virtuous man, for indeed the privilege was almost exclusively awarded to men, was the ideal citizen whose duty was to serve the good of the whole community.

At first sight this separation of the purposes of education into an apparently mutually exclusive polarity - the education of either the *philosopher* or the *orator* - goes against common sense. However, Kimball demonstrates how, at different periods in the history of Western education, a tendency to emphasise one above the other has existed. The tradition of the philosophers holds that the pursuit of knowledge is the highest good. This is the line from Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, to Boethius, the schoolmen of medieval Paris, the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment, Thomas H. Huxley, modern science, and the great research universities of the present.

The line of the orators emphasises the public expression of what is known eschewing cloistered individual research. One aim of education in this tradition was to educate the good citizen to lead society. Crucial importance was placed on language, texts, and tradition, of linking to and building up a community of learning

and knowledge. This is the line of Isocrates, Cicero, Quintilian, the *artes liberales* of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance humanists, the vision of Matthew Arnold and of the teachers of the liberal arts today, with their focus on recreating learning communities as the central business of education.<sup>2</sup>

The ideal of the *philosophical* tradition is the freedom of the individual and the intellect, but its puzzle, as an educational philosophy, is what else to teach besides this freedom. Indeed, it can only be a pseudo-freedom that justifies alienation in the name of intellectual detachment. Today the heirs of the philosophers defend the absoluteness of critical rationality while presuming nothing to be absolute, and the ideal of science detached from any obligation from human community no longer has an entirely glorious sound. The *orator* asks that a philosophy make a difference in the world, that it enhance virtue by persuading others, for all teaching is understood to be at some level a moral enterprise. However, the tradition of the orator has always been in danger of dogmatism and absolutism.<sup>3</sup> Kimball demonstrates how problems have arisen whenever one ideal of liberal education has become pre-eminent and the dialectical balance between the two ideals has been lost. He argues that the balance is to be preserved because

it arises from the distinction between reason and speech, between *ratio* and *oratio*. These two capacities combined together in the Greek word *logos* have been considered the defining characteristics of human nature.<sup>4</sup>

### **The perspective of the progressive educators**

These two streams, and the swinging of emphasis throughout history from one to the other, as described by Kimball, provide an elegant historical road map of where education in the West has been. Liberal education, while having a long tradition, was always the province of the privileged and it is only since the introduction of universal, compulsory and secular education that the policy makers in both State and private school systems have had to deal with the question of where to place the emphasis. For the first time in history, education had become the province, not only of the privileged or exceptional few but of 'the masses'. The dialectical nature of the issue is purposefully being emphasised because the debate, about whether education should serve the interests of the individual or the society, re-emerged in the nineteenth century, stimulated by Hegelian thought, and continued into the twentieth. Cleverley comments that

[t]he nineteenth century was characterised in part by vigorous discussion of the relationship between the individual and society. The framework in which this took place was in large measure derived from the writings of Georg Wilhelm Friederich Hegel, a German idealist philosopher whose work in the early nineteenth century asserted the primacy of society in the ordering of human conduct.<sup>5</sup>

German idealism grew and spread to the English speaking world where it influenced some educators. How balancing the needs of the individual and that of society was resolved by the 'individualists' and the 'social educators' in the nineteenth and twentieth century progressive education movement will now be considered. It is interesting to note that Karl Marx, John Dewey and Rudolf Steiner acknowledge their indebtedness to Hegel, though each pursued almost totally different social

ends. In nineteenth-century Europe progressive educators, such as Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi and Friederich Froebel, stressed personal development over social adjustment, though neither were as extreme in their views as Jean Jacques Rousseau in the century before. Of the twentieth century progressive educators all were conscious of the problem of whether to place the emphasis on the individual or society, and although a focus on the individual was generally the hallmark of progressive educational ideas, none have pursued it to an extreme in practice.

In his early career John Dewey was a leading figure in the Progressive Education Association of North America but in 1928 repudiated its aims because, among a number of reasons, it overemphasised the education of the individual and had no social purpose in view.<sup>6</sup> Dewey believed that education had a great role to play in social reconstruction, and that schools could be one of the main instruments in fashioning it. Reflecting the Hegelian influence, Dewey believed that an individual must be seen as a member of a social group, for without the group the individual was nothing.<sup>7</sup> He rejected the dualism that raised the question ‘Which is more important, the individual or society?’ He wrote in 1897:

In sum, I believe that the individual who is to be educated is a social individual, and that society is an organic union of individuals. If we eliminate the social factor from the child we are left only with an abstraction; if we eliminate the individual factor from society, we are left only with an inert and lifeless mass.<sup>8</sup>

Dewey expected that the school would become ‘a miniature community, an embryonic society’<sup>9</sup>, in which children could learn the social virtues of cooperation, consideration, the dignity of labour, concentration and workmanship through first hand experience. His view is consistent with the ideas of the philosopher Rousseau, and the educator Pestalozzi, and in seeking to give new direction and cohesion to group-life and effort Dewey echoes some of the practices of Cecil Reddie and John Badley, two English progressive educators.

Most progressive educators tried to get a balance between individual and social needs. Cecil Reddie designed Abbotsholme specifically for the sons of the directing classes. Reddie's interest had been to produce generations of new leaders who would reconstruct English society. In other words, individual development was cultivated for a social end. A less zealous expression of this goal was pursued by J.H. Badley of Bedales, who leaned more towards the production of creative individuals who would live a fulfilling life through which a more humane and culturally enriched society might emerge.<sup>10</sup> Badley articulated clearly the dilemma which is the fundamental problem of life in a community. ‘To combine freedom and responsibility [and] to reconcile the claims of individuality with social obligations.’ The Bedales school motto is ‘*The work of each for the weal of all*’, but as the Bedales school developed, Badley's attention tended to be directed more toward the new individual than to the new society. Another progressive educator trying to find a balance was Kurt Hahn, who was interested in developing both leadership ability and an attitude of service to the community. His initiative was to engage young people in adventure and service centred activities (such as the Outward Bound courses, sea and mountain rescue, and community service projects) towards the end of character training and learning to work co-operatively in groups.<sup>11</sup>

Some progressive educators focused more strongly on the individual. A.S.Neill, in founding Summerhill, wanted to ‘make the school fit the child instead

of making the child fit the school'.<sup>12</sup> This dramatic claim arose from a genuine desire to cater for individual needs. However, allowing children to be responsible for themselves, and giving them the freedom (rather than imposing a duty) to be responsible, was Neill's answer to the development of social responsibility.<sup>13</sup> Maria Montessori, like Neill, valued children's freedom and independence highly. The Montessori method had a widespread influence in the Western world, especially in early childhood education. In the words of Dr. Montessori:

No one can be free unless he is independent; therefore the first active manifestations of the child's individual liberty must be so guided that through this activity he may arrive at independence..<sup>14</sup>

Criticism of the Montessori method centred on the assertion that it was so focused on individual development that the children failed to get the social training that comes from joint undertakings and group instruction.<sup>15</sup> Whether this judgement is still valid today is an open question.

The New Education Fellowship (NEF), of which the majority of progressive schools were members, debated at its conferences their common aims. The aims that were stressed at its Calais Conference in 1921 are revealing for their breadth and balance. They not only include 'supremacy of the spirit', individuality, and innate interests, but also individual and social responsibility, cooperation, worthy citizenship, and individual dignity.<sup>16</sup> Thus we see that the progressive educators had a combination of aims balancing the needs of the individual with the need to live in a society as a contributing member.

The Waldorf or Rudolf Steiner schools have tried to cater for both individual needs and the development of the social group by implementing, among a number of innovative features, a unique organizational structure in which the class teachers remain with the same group of children for the length of the primary years. This aims to achieve cohesiveness of the group as well as permitting teachers to attend to the needs of individuals.<sup>17</sup> Waldorf school educators aim to apply Steiner's 'Social Ethic' in the classroom as well as in their school communities. This ethic, the origin of which will be discussed later, states that:

The healing social life is only found when in the mirror of each human soul the whole community finds its reflection and when in the community the virtue of each one is living.<sup>18</sup>

The central social aim of institutions which have their basis in Steiner's philosophy (which he called *Anthroposophy* from *anthropos*=human and *sophia*=wisdom) of which Waldorf schools are one, is to foster a society in which the community makes it possible for the individual to become even more of an individual who on his or her own part constantly strives to serve the community. In classrooms, a sense of respect for the individual is engendered, human relationships fostered and co-operation on a large scale achieved.<sup>19</sup> These are lessons of the greatest value for a happier social future and they have their basis in a philosophy of ethical individualism and social responsibility based on freedom. To answer the question of how this view came to be part of the Waldorf school movement we will have to become familiar with Steiner's social theory because, as the pioneer Swedish Waldorf educator, Frans Calgren rightly asserts:

Whoever wishes to understand Rudolf Steiner education in its full implications will have to come to terms with the ideas of the Threefold Social Order, because one of the fundamental goals of his art of education is the endeavour to awaken and to cultivate these social capabilities already in childhood and youth.<sup>20</sup>

However, before embarking on an outline of the Threefold Social Order and the educational movement that emerged from it, a brief and condensed review of Steiner's life and his work on social renewal will be given. This is necessary because Steiner was a prolific writer and there was a span of thirty years during which his ideas on this subject matured and came to light and eventually became rooted in Waldorf educational methodology and school organisation.

### **Biographical sketch of Rudolf Steiner<sup>21</sup>**

Rudolf Steiner was born in 1861 in a border town between Austria and Hungary, now in Croatia, in relatively humble circumstances, his father being a railway telegraphist and station master. He entered Vienna Technical University in 1879 where he pursued a scientific course but maintained himself by tutoring in both scientific and classical subjects. In 1891 he was invited to work at the Goethe-Schiller Institute in Weimar where he was in charge of editing Goethe's large collection of scientific works. In 1894 Steiner was awarded his Ph. D. by the University of Rostock for his thesis *Wahrheit und Wissenschaft* (Truth and Science) which he subsequently extended and published as *Philosophie der Freiheit* (Philosophy of Freedom)<sup>22</sup>.

In 1897 he became joint editor of the Magazine for Literature in Berlin, where he made many associations with literary and dramatic circles. From 1899 to 1904 he gave lectures and courses to the Workers' Educational Institute in Berlin. In this period he was invited to address the German Branch of the Theosophical Society, of which he subsequently became leader from 1902 to 1912. As a result of differences in approach, Steiner withdrew from the Theosophical Society and in 1913 established the Anthroposophical Society with a majority of the German Branch theosophists who followed him into this new and independent movement. It made its headquarters in Dornach, Switzerland where it continues to this day.

Before his death in 1925 Steiner published 41 books and delivered about 6,000 lectures. The *Gesamtausgabe* (Collected Works) amounts to 200 volumes. Apart from Waldorf education, which is most widely known, Steiner inspired renewal in a wide variety of work spheres, and professional training institutions as well as practical working centres exist in Bio-dynamic agriculture, anthroposophically orientated medicine, curative education and social therapy, architecture, ethical investment and community banking, Goethean science research centres, Christian Community churches, artistic training in eurythmy, speech and drama, painting and sculpture. The widespread acceptance of his educational ideas is indicated by the fact that in 1994 there were over 640 Waldorf (Rudolf Steiner) schools, 1087 kindergartens, three hundred curative education centres, and sixty Waldorf teacher training institutes in more than fifty countries.<sup>23</sup>

### **Developments in Steiner's ideas for social renewal**

In 1886 when Steiner was editing Goethe's scientific writings in Weimar, he published *A Theory of Knowledge Based on Goethe's World Conception*.<sup>24</sup> This slim volume provided a philosophical foundation for all his later work by addressing the relation between the inner world of the human being (that is of *thinking*) to the outer world which is perceptible by the senses. It also contained a number of significant thoughts about social inquiry. In the section on the spiritual<sup>25</sup> or cultural sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) he stated that the cultural sciences have as their object of study the human being: 'It is human actions, creations, ideas with which we have to do,' and that the task of these sciences is to 'interpret the human being to himself and to humanity.'<sup>26</sup>

Thus Steiner suggested that the social sciences are different from the natural sciences and that their task is understanding human consciousness as expressed in social creation. Laws, organisational structures, and political, social, and economic forms reveal the contours of consciousness: they are an external manifestation of the ideas and values of individuals and groups.<sup>27</sup> Since social and economic life is a human creation, reflecting consciousness, and social science has the task of interpreting human beings to themselves, the social or cultural sciences 'are in the highest degree sciences of freedom.'<sup>28</sup>

The next major step in the unfolding of Steiner's social ideas came in 1898 when he was in Berlin editing the *Magazin für Literatur*, in which he frequently commented on the social and political issues of the day. He formulated his 'Basic Sociological Law' as follows.

At the beginning of culture humanity strives to create social arrangements in which the interests of the individual are sacrificed for the interests of the whole. Later developments lead to a gradual freeing of the individual from the interests of the community and to an unfolding of individual needs and capacities.<sup>29</sup>

In pondering the sweep of history and the gradual emergence of individual rights from Greco-Roman times to the present, this law or principle appears justified and points to one of the central aspects of historical evolution, the emergence of individual consciousness. Indeed, the evolution of consciousness is a central feature of Steiner's thought.

In 1905, while active within the Theosophical Society, Steiner formulated what he called the 'Fundamental Social Law' which states that:

The well-being of a community of cooperatively working human beings is the greater the less individuals demand the proceeds of their work for themselves, or in other words, the more they make over these proceeds to their co-workers and the more their needs are met not by their own work but from that of others.<sup>30</sup>

This law represented an effort to make the principle of brotherhood and sisterhood practical within theosophical circles, and also to separate wages and work at a time when the German labour movement was concerning itself more with increasing the wages of its members than in seeking to abolish the commodity character of work, which Steiner considered to be wage slavery. He also understood that the purpose of the economic sphere was to deal with production, distribution and consumption of goods and, by this definition, the areas of land, labour and money were seen to belong outside the confines of economic activity.<sup>31</sup>

In a lecture in Zurich in 1912 titled ‘Love and its Meaning in the World’, are expressed a few significant thoughts on the struggle between the forces of egoism and love, of antisocial and social tendencies within human consciousness. This struggle between the social and anti-social forces became Steiner’s fundamental concern as he experienced a Europe ravaged by World War I.

The period 1917-22 was the peak of Steiner’s active engagement with the social questions of his time. The year 1917 can be seen as a turning point in modern history because it was the year of the Russian Revolution in which Lenin and the Bolsheviks came to power, and it was also the year in which the United States overcame its isolationist tendencies and entered the World War. In hindsight one can see how from this point onwards the United States and the Soviet Union were to play major roles in the evolution of Europe and the world.

Out of this war experience Rudolf Steiner gave birth to the threefold imagination of the human being and showed how this imagination could lead to healing social forms, in that a threefold ordering of society provided an alternative to both capitalism and communism. In 1919 the Waldorf school in Stuttgart had already grown out of the activity of Steiner and the League for the Threefold Social Order, and it was hoped that other successful models would follow. At the end of 1919 *Der Kommende Tag* [The Coming Day] a ‘Stock Company to further Economic and Spiritual Values’<sup>32</sup> was formed. In time it was to embrace some 20 organisations, including farms, the Waldorf school, research institutes, chemical factories, two printing companies, and the Waldorf Astoria cigarette factory.<sup>33</sup> This practical experiment in the application of threefold ideas is not well known in the English-speaking world. In 1920 another step was taken when Steiner showed that the task of social renewal requires a path of individual spiritual development. The ‘Motto of the Social Ethic,’ previously mentioned, captures the essence of his work for social renewal, showing that social life both reflects and shapes individual human consciousness.

The healing social life is only found when in the mirror of each human soul the whole community finds its reflection and when in the community the virtue of each one is living.<sup>34</sup>

From another perspective this ethic is deeply Christian, both in its insistence on the freedom of the individual and in its readiness to accept totally the fact of human interdependence. Using Kimball’s terms this ethic would suggest a restoring of the balance between the ideals of the philosopher and the orator, and therefore between *ratio* and *oratio*, the two poles of the *logos*.

### **Social conditions in Germany in the aftermath of World War I**

In the social unrest in Germany following World War I, an initiative group of small industrialists in Wurttemberg attempted to find new forms for their impulse towards self-determination and self-administration. Steiner tried to focus their attention on a more far reaching perspective with his ‘Guidelines for a Threefold Social Organism.’<sup>35</sup> In his book *The Threefold Social Order* Steiner argued that the real causes of the First World War lay in the chaos and confusion which arose in ‘one-fold states’ when the three natural divisions of human life were not clearly separated.<sup>36</sup>

Steiner was convinced that much social unrest, and particularly the feelings of inferiority widespread among the working classes, was not due, as generally supposed, to frustration on political and economic grounds, but from cultural deprivation.<sup>37</sup> He believed that it was the experience of an unworthy, meaningless existence that had brought a cry for reformation of human social relations in Germany in the aftermath of World War I<sup>38</sup>, that ‘many men no longer consider their value determined by what they are as human beings but by a rank they have reached in the hierarchy of officialdom,’<sup>39</sup> and that ‘industrialism introduces something into our lives which in a higher sense makes man's will meaningless.’<sup>40</sup> ‘Capitalism and the machine ... give the worker no substance with which to content his soul as a human being.’<sup>41</sup> His views were not popular with established political parties or trade union organisers who mostly thought in terms of communist theory with regard to the struggle for workers to own the means of production.

Steiner saw the ‘invisible hand’ doctrine and the concept of enlightened self interest, as formulated by Adam Smith in his *Wealth of Nations*, as a mental straitjacket that distorted the meaning of work and of economic processes. He held that we work for meaning, not only for profit, and although the motive power of economic production is essentially to serve human needs as efficiently as possible, at its heart, economic activity is a cooperative, communal activity and not a competitive struggle for profit and survival, as rationalist economic thinking would have it.<sup>42</sup>

In the decisive years after the defeat of Germany and its allies Steiner addressed himself mainly to Germans. He aimed to establish in Central Europe a diversified social entity which by its example might mitigate the rigours of Western capitalism and Communist tyranny. His aim for Central Europe was to break down the power of the unitary state before it became completely totalitarian. He wanted to stem the intoxication of nationalism and to prevent the Germans from establishing another *Reich*. He tried to make the Germans realise that they could only influence the world if they concentrated on what was universally human, pointing to the cultural treasures, such as Goethe and Novalis, whom they could call their own but who, having concerned themselves with the universally human, had transcended what is purely German.<sup>43</sup> Such attitudes made Steiner a target for German nationalists who made an attempt on his life. As a result towards the end of 1922 he stopped lecturing in public to German audiences.

Steiner’s social intentions are incompatible with the ethos of capitalism and in many respects more unconventional than communism. His ideas were radical, egalitarian, and anti-nationalistic<sup>44</sup> but although he withdrew from his extensive public efforts to influence social, economic, and political events, and the ‘The Coming Day’ initiative finally closed in 1924<sup>45</sup>, the Waldorf schools continued to develop independently all over the world.

### **The development of the ideal of the Threefold Social Order**

In eighteenth century France the call for *Liberty*, *Equality*, and *Fraternity* sounded forth from the revolutionary ranks. Steiner maintained that these three ideals continued to be sought in the society of his time and so developed a form for a social order that supported a life that would give to human beings a sense of worth and value. Steiner insisted that in order to thrive the social organism must reflect the threefold organisation of the human being. But where does freedom or liberty truly

reside, and where do we find equality? And though the term fraternity or brotherhood/sisterhood is often heard, what does it signify and where do we meet it? Steiner explained that we meet it in the image of the threefold human being.

In the anthroposophical *weltanschauung* the human being is differentiated into three qualitatively very different modes of experience which are never isolated from the rest of world. The human form, as well as its various functions, is considered to be a microcosmic expression of ever widening forms and systems in the macrocosmic world. The form of 'threefoldness' may be encountered in a number of contexts. In 1904 in his book *Theosophy* Steiner describes the human being as a threefold being, consisting of *spirit, soul, and body*;<sup>46</sup> In 1917 he first gave out his description of the threefold organism in which he shows how the body consists of three distinct though closely related organizations, a nerve-sense system centred in the head, a rhythmic-circulatory system centred in the chest, and a metabolic-limb system centred in the abdomen. He goes on to describe however that in the human body,

there is *no such thing as absolute centralisation* ... and moreover, each of these systems has its own special and distinct relation to the outer world, the head system through the senses, the rhythmic or circulatory system through the breathing, the metabolic system through the organs of nourishment and the organs of movement.<sup>47</sup>

These three systems are co-active in every part of the body: where there is nerve there is blood, and along with the blood, respiration and metabolism. They represent three different principles: the nerve-sense system comprising brain, nerves and senses is related to the conscious life of *thought*; the rhythmic-circulatory system comprising lungs, heart and circulation as the centre of the rhythmic functioning of the body to the life of *feeling*; and the metabolic-limb system to the life of *will*. The table clarifies the relationship between the various elements.

HUMAN BEING	HUMAN SOUL	PHYSIOLOGICAL SYSTEM
Spirit	Thinking	Nerves/Senses (centred in head)
Soul	Feeling	Rhythmic (centred in chest)
Body	Will	Metabolic/Limbs (centred in abdomen)

This human threefoldness is deemed to be reflected in the threefold nature of the social organism. Within the threefold social order the 'cultural' sphere is that realm of the organism where the expression of individual freedom or *liberty* can find its rightful place. In the realm of the human soul freedom may be experienced in thinking, and this is expressed through the body's nerve-sense system. The political or 'rights' sphere comes into play where individuals live in relationship with others, and this usually entails relinquishing some personal freedom out of respect for the interests of others and for the sake of social harmony. The human rhythmic system, the physical basis for feeling and where the air we breathe in common with others is processed, is analogous to the 'rights' sphere of society. *Equality* belongs to the political sphere of society, where the legislation of human rights is enacted in parliaments and enforced through the courts. The 'economic' sphere is concerned with what is most efficient and sustainable in the production, distribution and consumption of resources, such as goods and services. In reality, no one works for

themselves alone, rather the work of each person helps to provide for the needs of others, just like the metabolic organs serve the whole body. The key principle in this sphere is therefore not liberty or equality, but *fraternity*.

It will then be evident that human cooperation in the *economic* life must be based on fraternity. ... In the second member, the *civil rights* system, which is concerned with purely human, person-to-person relations, it is necessary to strive for the realisation of the idea of equality. And in the relatively independent *spiritual* sector of the social organism it is necessary to strive for the realisation of the idea of freedom.<sup>48</sup>

With this formulation Steiner integrates the various parts of the human body and the human soul and unites them with a profound integrity into the spheres of society of which we are a part and to which we are inextricably united. The table should clarify the interrelations between the various elements.

SOUL ACTIVITY	SOCIAL ATTRIBUTE	SOCIAL SPHERE
Thinking	Liberty	Cultural (Spiritual life)
Feeling	Equality	Political (Legal/rights)
Willing	Fraternity	Economic

But a healthy social order, like a healthy body, is found when the three organisms are working harmoniously. That is, when the principles of *liberty*, *equality* and *fraternity* are working in their appropriate sphere. Where this does not occur and there is a crossing of boundaries in social principles, an unhealthy social order is the usual result. For example, when the ideal of *liberty* dominates the *economic* sphere, as in the cult of individualism in free market capitalism, the freedom of the few is often at the expense of workers whose exploitation results in a widening gap between rich and poor. By measuring every human activity by its degree of profitability, capitalism destroys not only our environment but also the cohesion of society and the morality of the individual. But Steiner most of all attacked the hallowed principle of market forces. In October 1919 he observed that the ‘body social’ had become unhealthy because the economic sphere was dominating the whole social organism, and as a result education, which belongs in the ‘cultural-spiritual sphere’ and therefore should be developed out of the ideal of freedom, had become subject to market forces.

The economic aspect of life has to a great extent overspread everything, because it has outgrown both political and cultural life, and has acted like a suggestion on the thoughts feelings and passions of men. Thus it becomes ever more evident that the manner in which the business of a nation is carried on determines, in reality, the cultural and political life of the people. It becomes ever more evident that the commercial and industrial magnates, by their position alone, have acquired the monopoly of culture. The economically weak remain the uneducated. A certain connection has become apparent between the economic and the cultural, and between the cultural and the political organisations.

The cultural life has gradually become one that does not evolve out of its own inner needs and does not follow its own impulses, but, especially when it is under public administration, as in schools and educational institutions, it receives the form most useful to the political authority. The human being can no longer be judged according to his capacities; he can no longer be developed as his inborn talents demand. Rather is it asked, ‘What does the

state want?' 'What talents are needed for business?' 'How many men are wanted with a particular training?' The teaching, the schools, the examinations are all directed to this end. The cultural life cannot follow its own laws of development; it is adapted to the political and the economic life.<sup>49</sup>

The passage is quoted in full because this analysis seems prophetic concerning the consequences for the education sector, of government economic rationalist policy, in the latter part of this century.

The usual outcome when the ideal of *equality* pervades the *cultural* sphere is sectarianism and indoctrination. This may be seen in religious fundamentalism or uncritical promotion of say, communist ideology as in the 'Cultural Revolution' in China. Another example of a confusion of principles in the social order is when the ideal of *fraternity* dominates the *cultural* sphere. The consequences of collectivisation in both Soviet and Chinese society was communal ownership of the means of production but at the cost of the suppression of the freedom of the individual. For Steiner this one-sided tendency, in which 'the hand' ignores the needs of 'the heart' and 'the head', was anti-social because the needs of one aspect marginalised the other two. He believed that such one-sidedness was the consequence of miseducation, commenting that such

anti-social conditions are brought about because people are turned out into social life not educated to feel socially. People with social feelings can only come from a mode of education that is directed and carried on by persons who themselves feel socially. The *social* question will never be touched until the education question and the question of the spiritual life are treated as a vital part of it.<sup>50</sup>

Thus Steiner saw education as playing a pivotal role in bringing about social renewal, stating that

if we will to bring about a true form of society in future it must be prepared through people's education....We must strongly develop the forces that *can* be developed in children's souls, so that later on they harvest the fruits of their childhood learning.<sup>51</sup>

### **The Threefold Social Order and the Waldorf Schools**

Although no comprehensive national movement for a threefold social order ever developed in the sense hoped for by Steiner, the campaign for a new social order had been especially well received in the big Waldorf-Astoria cigarette-factory in Stuttgart, Germany. The employees there had heard Rudolf Steiner speak on questions of further education, and wanted a new kind of education for their children. The director, Emil Molt, supported them and on April 23, 1919, asked Rudolf Steiner to take on the planning and leadership of a school for the children of the workers of the factory.<sup>52</sup> This school was founded in September 1919 'in conformity with the ideas underlying the threefold social order.'<sup>53</sup> In regard to the founding of this school, Steiner states:

At the foundation of the school I not only endeavoured to give shape to externals, corresponding to the requirements and the impulse of the threefold

order. I also strove to present pedagogy and didactics to the teaching staff of this new kind of school in such a light that the human being would be educated to face life and be able to bring about a social future in accordance with certain unconquerable instincts in human nature. ... The pedagogy of the future will not be a normal science. It will be a true art, the art of developing the human being.<sup>54</sup>

In developing the first Waldorf school, Steiner connected the three areas of social life (cultural, rights, and economic) and the three universally human ideals (liberty, equality, and fraternity) with the three main developmental stages of the growing young human being - infancy, childhood and adolescence - and the educational principles which should prevail at each stage, namely imitation, authority and independence.<sup>55</sup> Steiner refers to the aspects of the human being which are developed in the first three seven-year phases of life by the terminology 'physical', 'etheric', and 'astral' bodies.

...upon this threefold educational basis must be erected what is to flourish for mankind's future. If we do not know that the physical body must become an imitator in the right way we shall merely implant animal instincts in this body. If we are not aware that between the seventh and fourteenth year the ether body passes through a special development that must be based on authority, there will develop in man merely a universal cultural drowsiness, and the force needed for the rights organism will not be present. If from the fifteenth year onward we do not infuse all education in a sensible way with the power of love that is bound to the astral body, men will never be able to develop their astral bodies into independent beings. These things intertwine.

Proper imitation develops freedom;  
 Authority develops the rights life;  
 Brotherliness, love, develops the economic life.

But turned about it is also true. When love is not developed in the right way, freedom is lacking; and when imitation is not developed in the right way, animal instincts grow rampant.<sup>56</sup>

Life stage	Physiological system	Soul activity	Pedagogic mode	Social sphere
Infant 0-7	Metabolic limbs	Willing	Imitation	Economic
Child 7-14	Rhythmic	Feeling	Authority	Rights
Adolescent 14+	Nerves/senses	Thinking	Freedom/responsibility	Cultural

With these comments Steiner indicated firstly, the importance of developing the moral forces in childhood and youth through an education which is founded upon the threefold image of the human being, and secondly with developing a pedagogy aimed towards helping the children strengthen the qualities that would allow them to respond to the social ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. The implications of these ideas for a practical teaching methodology are covered in a wide range of books on Waldorf education and will not be detailed here.

### Threefoldness and School Organisation and Management

The school community may be considered a miniature society which also has a cultural, rights and an economic sphere. Steiner placed education within the spiritual-cultural sphere, insisting that all responsibility for the management of institutions within this sphere belongs to those directly involved in its day to day running. In other words the educational policy of a school should be formulated and executed by the teachers, since it is an institution of the free spiritual life, though social and economic policy will involve other stakeholders.

Although, according to Steiner, the school belongs to the spiritual-cultural sphere, the other two branches of the threefold order are necessarily present. School structures usually comprise the College of Teachers, which is made up of the teaching staff, a School Council or Board of Directors, and a Parent Association made up of the parents of the children who attend the school. While these three spheres of activity serve in common the whole school community, they are differentiated because they each have separate functions. The arrangement of the human organism into three systems, emphasises Steiner 'is not a spatial delimitation of the bodily members, but is according to the activities (functions) of the organism...Nevertheless, the three functional types are, *according to their natures*, sharply separated.'<sup>57</sup>

The College of Teachers, which normally has the responsibility for directing a Waldorf school, has the primary task of ensuring that the students receive the education that it claims to offer, mainly an 'education towards freedom'<sup>58</sup>; secondly, it must maintain as paramount the staff requirement for academic freedom in order that individual teachers'creativity may be sustained; and thirdly, it must defend the freedom of the school from interference by the state or other interests, such as business or industry, in matters concerning curriculum and methodology.<sup>59</sup>

By virtue of the fact that these three groups contribute to the health and well being of the school community, they may be pictured as adopting the function of one of the three spheres of the social order. Thus, education, 'lying as it does at the root of all spiritual life, must be put under the management of those people who are educating and teaching'<sup>60</sup> and therefore rightfully becomes the responsibility of the College of Teachers. But this freedom should not only apply to Waldorf schools.

Even the schools which directly serve the state and the economy should be administered by the educators: law schools, trade schools, agricultural and industrial colleges, all should be administered by representatives of a free spiritual life.<sup>61</sup>

SOCIAL ATTRIBUTE	SOCIAL SPHERE	SCHOOL SPHERE	RESPONSIBLE BODIES
Freedom	Cultural	Education	College of Teachers
Equality	Rights	Communication	School Council (Parents + Teachers)
Fraternity	Economic	Financial	Parent Association

It is evident from the preceding pages that Steiner believed, and vigorously asserted, that through education the foundations can be laid for a new form of society. This foundation can only be strengthened if the social organism (or institution) which provides the education is itself a reflection of the form of society towards which it is striving. 'If this social organism [of the Waldorf school] is to function in a healthy way it must methodically cultivate three constituent members.'<sup>62</sup> This is a clear recommendation that Waldorf schools should strive to structure themselves in a threefold way because it was out of this impulse for social renewal that they had their beginning.

## Conclusion

This paper began by drawing attention to the age old question of whether education should be primarily concerned with developing the individual person or emphasise service to society. It then embarked on an exploration of the question by considering how light could be thrown upon it through the perspective of the aims of Liberal education. Bruce Kimball's interpretation was used as a basis from which to judge the current situation. Kimball, having argued that the two ideals of Liberal education, the tradition of the philosophers (*ratio*, reason) and that of the orators (*oratio*, speech), have each become pre-eminent at different times in history, concludes in his book that in contemporary times the philosophical ideal is dominant. In other words the pole of the *logos* that supports individualism dominates our culture and the pole that places community at the centre of human endeavour is sadly in need of restoration.

Following this brief introduction to the historical nature of the question the paper then outlined the response of various educators of the progressive education movement. While there were shades of emphasis either way, for example, Dewey favouring a more socially oriented education, and Neill a more individually centred one, it was evident from the goals of the New Education Fellowship, that while satisfying the need for individual development was an important focus, this was in order that individuals could better contribute their talents to meeting the needs of society. At the end of the discussion of the progressive educators we encountered Steiner's social ethic which clearly indicated that an ethical individualism which embraces social responsibility is central to the aims of Waldorf education.

With this as an entry point a sketch of Steiner's life was outlined and the various steps in the development of his ideas for social renewal. Having established that social science is concerned with understanding human consciousness, and that laws, and political, social, and economic forms are human creations, Steiner leads to the conclusion that we are free to change them to make them more relevant to the conditions of the times. But we are only free to the degree that we are striving to create a balance in our own souls between our social and anti-social tendencies, between the forces of love and egoism, between *oratio* and *ratio*. This striving necessarily requires us to work with the 'basic sociological law', the 'fundamental social law, and the 'motto for the social ethic' in such a way that they became part of our social practice. Steiner did not separate social development from spiritual development.

The paper then showed how, in the aftermath of the First World War, Steiner tried, unsuccessfully, to influence the reconstruction of German social life towards adopting the Threefold ideas. An elaboration of how these ideas were

developed as was their connection between the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity and the threefold human being (both physiological systems and psychological aspects). As a conclusion an outline was given of how the threefold ideas became implanted in the educational and organizational forms of the Waldorf school indicating that the vision of a social future created by socially responsible individuals lies at the heart of the social aims of the Waldorf school movement

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bruce A. Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: The History of the Idea of Liberal Education*, Teachers College Press Columbia, NY, London, 1986.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph L. Featherstone in the Foreword to Kimball's book.

<sup>3</sup> Featherstone *ibid*

<sup>4</sup> Kimball, p. 239

<sup>5</sup> John Cleverley and Dennis Phillips, *Visions of Childhood*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1987, p. 97

<sup>6</sup> Frederick Eby, *The Development of Modern Education* (Second edition), Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice Hall, 1961, pp. 629-30

<sup>7</sup> Compare with Florian Znaniecki's Humanistic Sociology which holds that individuals have a meaning only in the context of their culture, and vice-versa; Also the claims of some post-structuralist theorists that the individual 'subject' can only be understood as a social construct known only in the context of the discourses of which they are a part.

<sup>8</sup> John Dewey, *My Pedagogic Creed*, quoted in Cleverley and Phillips, *op. cit.* p.109

<sup>9</sup> John Dewey, *The School and Society* (Revised Edition) University of Chicago Press, 1916 p.18.

However, these views clearly change during the years of reconstruction in the USA in the mid 1930s.

<sup>10</sup> W.F. Connell, *A History of Education in the Twentieth Century World*, Canberra: Curriculum Development Centre, 1980, pp.127-8.

<sup>11</sup> Hermann Rohrs (ed), *Kurt Hahn*, Heidelberg 1966: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970

<sup>12</sup> A.S.Neill, *Summerhill* (Pelican, 1968) p.20.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* pp. 140-42

<sup>14</sup> Maria Montessori *The Montessori Method*, in Luella Cole, *A History of Education: Socrates to Montessori*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, NY, 1950, p.567.

<sup>15</sup> Cole, p.573

<sup>16</sup> James Bowen, *A History of Western Education* (vol.3), London: Methuen & Co., 1981

<sup>17</sup> Francis Edmunds, *Rudolf Steiner's Gift to Education: The Waldorf Schools*. London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1975

<sup>18</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *Verses and Meditations*, London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1961

<sup>19</sup> Rudi Lissau, *Rudolf Steiner: Life, work, inner path and social initiatives*, Hawthorne Press, Stroud, UK, 1987, p. 120

<sup>20</sup> Frans Calgren, *Education Towards Freedom*, Lanthorn Press, East Grinstead, England, 1976, p. 15

<sup>21</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *The Story of My Life*, Anthroposophical Publishing Co., London, 1928; Johannes Hemleben, *Rudolf Steiner: A Documentary Biography*, Henry Goulden, East Grinstead, Sussex, 1975; Stewart Easton, *Rudolf Steiner, Herald of a New Epoch*, Anthroposophic Press, Spring Valley, NY, 1980; Rudi Lissau, *Rudolf Steiner: Life, work, inner path and social initiatives*, Hawthorne Press, Stroud, 1987.

<sup>22</sup> Steiner suggested 'spiritual activity' as a translation of the German word *Freiheit* (literally, 'freedom'). For him, *Freiheit* meant 'action, thinking, and feeling from out of the spiritual individuality of man.' The title of the first English translation was *The Philosophy of Freedom*, but at Steiner's request, for the second edition, the title changed to *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*. From a footnote by William Lindeman, the translator of *Truth and Science*, Mercury Press, NY, 1993, pp. iv-v

<sup>23</sup> *Waldorf Education: Exhibition Catalogue*, 44<sup>th</sup> Session of the International Conference on Education of UNESCO in Geneva, *Freunde der Erziehungskunst Rudolf Steiners e. V.*, p. 84

<sup>24</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *A Theory of Knowledge Based on Goethe's World Conception*, Anthroposophic Press, NY, 1968.

<sup>25</sup> 'Spiritual' is to be understood in the general sense of 'nonmaterial.' For example, ideas and mental pictures exist for us although not perceptible to our physical senses.

- <sup>26</sup> Christopher Schaefer, 'Rudolf Steiner and Social Renewal: An Introduction' in *Newsletter of the Anthroposophical Society in America*, Michaelmas 1988, pp. 3-10,
- <sup>27</sup> 'Rudolf Steiner directly aligned himself with social thinkers such as Max Weber and historians such as Dilthey and Rickert who argued for a separation in purpose and method between the natural and cultural sciences.' Schaefer, p. 4
- <sup>28</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>29</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>30</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *Geisteswissenschaft und soziale Frage*, [Spiritual science and the social question] contained in his complete works (*Gesamtausgabe*) Volume 34, quotation is translated by Schaefer and cited in his 1988 publication, p. 4  
Also, compare Steiner's formulation with Hegel's. 'The labour of the individual for his own wants is at the same time a satisfying of the needs of others, and reciprocally the satisfaction of his own needs is attained only through the labour of others.' G.W.F.Hegel, from *The Philosophy of Right and Law*, cited in Cleverley and Phillips, p. 98
- <sup>31</sup> Lissau, p. 135
- <sup>32</sup> Schaefer, 1988, p. 8
- <sup>33</sup> Schaefer, 1988, p. 6, who comments in a footnote that 'for an excellent review of the manifold political and social activities in which Steiner was engaged between 1917-22, see Hans Kuhn, *Dreigliederungs-Zeit: Rudolf Steiners Kampf für die Gesellschaft*, Philosophisch-Anthroposophischer Verlag, Dornach, 1978.'
- <sup>34</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *Verses and Meditations*, Rudolf Steiner Press, London, 1985, pp. 116-117
- <sup>35</sup> Albert Schmelzer, "How the Waldorf Movement Began", in *Waldorf Education Exhibition Catalogue*, 1994. *Freunde der Erziehungskunst Rudolf Steiners e.V.*, Stuttgart.1994, pp. 76-7
- <sup>36</sup> Steiner, R. *The Threefold Social Order* Anthroposophic Press, NY, 1966, pp. 77-82, esp. p.81
- <sup>37</sup> Frans Calgren, *Rudolf Steiner 1861-1925*, (3rd edition) The Goetheanum School of Spiritual Science, Dornach, Switzerland 1972, p. 32
- <sup>38</sup> Steiner, *The Threefold Commonwealth*, Macmillan, NY, 1922, p.82
- <sup>39</sup> Steiner, *Education as a Social Problem*, p. 34
- <sup>40</sup> *ibid* p. 37
- <sup>41</sup> Steiner, *Threefold Commonwealth*, p. 12
- <sup>42</sup> Christopher Schaefer, 'Rudolf Steiner as a Social Thinker', in *ReVision*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 1992 p. 59
- <sup>43</sup> Lissau, pp. 130-31
- <sup>44</sup> Lissau, p. 131
- <sup>45</sup> Schaefer, 1988, p.8
- <sup>46</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *Theosophy*, Rudolf Steiner Press, London, 1973. See Chapter 1.
- <sup>47</sup> *ibid*. p. 49
- <sup>48</sup> Steiner, *Towards Social Renewal*, RSP, London, 1977, p. 59
- <sup>49</sup> Steiner, *The Social Future*, Anthroposophic Press, NY, 1972, pp. 19-20
- <sup>50</sup> Steiner, *The Social Future*., p. xxiv
- <sup>51</sup> Steiner, *Education as a Social Problem*, Anthroposophic Press, NY, 1969 p. 45
- <sup>52</sup> Christine Murphy, *Emil Molt and the Beginnings of the Waldorf School Movement*, Floris Books, Edinburgh, 1991, pp137-38; also Frans Calgren, p. 33;
- <sup>53</sup> *The Social Future*, p. 97
- <sup>54</sup> *ibid*. pp.97-100
- <sup>55</sup> Steiner, *Education as a Social Problem*; Gilbert Childs, *Steiner Education: Theory and Practice*, 1991, p 5
- <sup>56</sup> *ibid*. Steiner p 17
- <sup>57</sup> *ibid* in Footnote p54
- <sup>58</sup> See Calgren, Introduction.
- <sup>59</sup> Steiner, *Towards Social Renewal*, p12
- <sup>60</sup> Steiner, *The Threefold Commonwealth*, Macmillan, NY, 1922, p. 19
- <sup>61</sup> Steiner, *Towards Social Renewal*, p13
- <sup>62</sup> Steiner, *Towards Social Renewal*, pp. 57-8