

Rudolf Steiner's Vision for our Social Future: Openings for Social Threefolding

by Martin Large

Rudolf Steiner started to advocate for social threefolding, for a threefold social order, in 1917, during the 1914-18 War. As Edward Udell wrote in the last *New View*¹ Steiner's initiative was ignited by Otto von Lerchenfeld, a Bavarian minister, asking him what could be done about the social and political situation. Steiner then took the radical step of describing the threefold nature of society, made up of cultural, political or rights and economic spaces in his two Memoranda of 1917.

Firstly, Steiner worked 'top down' in 1917-18 with some Austrian and German political leaders and civil servants to engage them in understanding social threefolding, as an alternative to the US President Wilson's 14 Points.² Secondly from late 1918, amidst social hardship and revolution, Steiner worked 'bottom up' as an activist, in response to widespread interest in his social vision. He offered a societal alternative to firstly the failed German and Austrian imperial bureaucratic states, secondly to Wilson's disastrous plan for fragmented nation states to replace the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and thirdly to communism. Despite speaking to large workers' gatherings, meeting industrialists, writing a best selling book *Towards Social Renewal* in 1919, both the right and the left of the political spectrum, adhering to various ideologies, rejected and somewhat demonised Steiner's ideas.

This was not surprising as Steiner saw the dangers of the one-sided dominance of any one ideology. For example, in his time, the dominance of the Bolshevik ideology in Russia over the state and the economy, or the danger of the state, with bureaucratic socialism, dominating culture and business, or, in the West, the business capture of the state and culture. He said in 1920 that social threefolding was, "... not a program or system for society as a whole, requiring the old system to cease suddenly and everything to be set up anew. The threefold idea can make a start with individual enterprises... the threefold idea is not utopian."³

This article will briefly explore a number of questions arising from Steiner's concepts. Firstly: How is social threefolding relevant now and what are the challenges we face? Secondly: How did my facilitation work lead to re-discovering Steiner's social vision? Thirdly: What are some different ways of understanding

social threefolding and, fourthly: What are some current openings and examples for 'green shoots' of threefolding?

In the early 1920's Steiner recognised that conditions for social threefolding were no longer suitable, but stated that at the beginning of the next century (our 21st century) "a window of the spiritual world will open in order to make it possible".⁴ Could this emerge, in our time, here in the West amidst social breakdown of the prevailing economic and political systems no longer working? If so, how can Steiner's social thinking deepen our analysis and strengthen effective action for the common good?

What are the challenges we face?

We face three world trends. Firstly, the neo liberal era is failing,⁵ with rising and unprecedented inequality. According to Oxfam, the international aid and development charity, 62 billionaires own more wealth than half the world's poorest 3.2 billion people. The rocky, unequal, financial system is ready to crash. Poor marginalised people are more aware than ever of the divided world. Secondly, there are environmental challenges such as climate destruction, massive soil loss and planetary limits to growth. Thirdly, as the Syrian civil war and the refugee crisis now affecting Europe indicate, the consequences of the post 9/11 global war on terror have been catastrophic for human security. Despite western politicians and military trying to maintain elite control through 'keeping the lid on' the freedoms of world communities through surveillance and wars – such as in Iraq – they are losing control. Such is the anxious climate that people ask, 'What will trigger the next crash?'

Facing such challenges, the reason why social threefolding is relevant is because it offers an original alternative. As market fundamentalism (a belief in unregulated markets) wears thin, people are looking for alternatives that can help with both analysis and action for change. A different world is possible. We can be hopeful as there are people with extraordinary capabilities for finding our way out of the neo liberal mess, and Steiner's societal vision offers a form of 'prophesying that suggests the possible'. For example you can glimpse the potential openings with biodynamic farms, Waldorf Schools and ethical banking such as the

Rudolf Steiner Foundation in the USA or Triodos in Europe.

Re-discovering Steiner's societal vision

I first became aware of the burning question about what is the alternative to market fundamentalism in the 1990's. I was working in peace and community building in the aftermath of the Yugoslav civil war near Vucovar in eastern Croatia near the Serbian border. During the planning for the work of their peace teams, activists asked me "What is the alternative to western free market capitalism and to communism?" They were looking for a human centred society, and I had no answers. However, I had already noticed, when working as a strategic planning facilitator with companies, government bodies and communities, which four urgent questions kept coming up. These key questions for people to address when planning for the future of their organisation included:

How can we build a more efficient and collaborative economy that meets all people's real needs, including the poor and future generations?
(Economy: mutuality, collaboration).

How are we building a more peaceful, democratic, just and equitable society so that people can participate in co-creating their future?
(Polity/Rights: Equality)

How are we renewing our culture and enabling every human being to reach and maintain their full human spiritual, creative, social and physical potential?
(Culture: Freedom)

How are we caring for the earth with all its living beings for present and future generations?
(Earthcare, sustainability)

These seed questions emerged when people analysed what was changing in the world. After discussing the questions, and telling real life stories of how people and organisations were responding, participants then identified the principle, or guiding value behind each question. This analysis and conversation was vital, because when people connected concretely with the principles, they got fired up for change – with inspiring stars to steer by.

The questions prompted me to re-discover and revisit Steiner's organic, human centred map of society as a threefold commonwealth, made up of cultural, political and economic systems that were separately constituted, each with their own unfolding stories, yet interconnected. He saw society as made up of broadly three different landscapes or spaces.

This insight was immediately useful for making sure

that there were people from those three sectors involved when building partnerships to address complex issues such as social housing. This resulted in organisations being connected and in dialogue with the leaders of the appropriate government, business and civil society organisations in their context.

Rudolf Steiner's Vision for the Societal Future: Social Threefolding

What was Steiner's vision for the societal future? Here is an overview of Steiner's social threefolding. This approach helps analyse situations, offers guidance for effective action and informs organisational development and strategic planning. Above all social threefolding can help rebalance our market fundamentalist society, by, for example, pushing back the market from areas of social life where it does not belong.

You can use social threefolding for identifying healthy boundaries between culture, politics and business. You can sense your concerns about issues such as the commercialisation of childhood versus protecting childhood. In threefolding terms, this is an example of negative boundary crossing where the economy oversteps the mark and both violates the rights to childhood and a family life free from commercialism. You can ask what examples of negative boundary crossing cause you concern. Consider the blanket state, or corporate, surveillance of people. For some oxymorons abound: 'state church', a 'government scientist', the privatisation of public land, the corporate media, the 'best democracy money can buy', 'for profit' health services, retired politicians getting well paid jobs in corporations that had benefited from their policies whilst in office, corporations writing tax breaks, politicians deciding school curricula, and so on.

Social threefolding can also help answer the question of the conditions for organisational success. For example, community land trusts (CLT) are well grounded on threefolding principles. They secure the land as a commons⁶ or right into the trusteeship of a civil society, non-profit body, whilst leasing the right to use the land to a homeowner, who owns the actual 'house structure' standing on the land. The homeowner is able to sell or buy the house, but not the land, to qualified buyers. CLT thinking sees the house as a commodity and the land as a commons held in trust, so that land 'value' is captured for community, rather than for private benefit. A public service broadcaster like the BBC in the UK needs to be autonomous, free, both from government and from business in order to be successful in avoiding the tendency to propaganda and advertising. Some business entrepreneurs have taken the encouraging step of putting their businesses and capital into charitable foundations, such as Hershey chocolate in the USA and the leading John Lewis department stores in Britain, in order to secure worker and community wellbeing,

as well as protecting the business long term from the predatory stock market (where they could otherwise be forced into a takeover).

People understand the wisdom of the threefold separation of the constitutional powers of the state into the executive, judiciary and legislature.

So, how does social threefolding work? One simple image of 'society' is of a three-legged stool upon which it can 'sit', or 'stand', with its 'legs' representing civil society (culture), politics (government, state) and the economy (business); however, this static image can be a little limiting as the economy, polity and cultural/civil society interact dynamically. It would be rather paradoxical to our normal thinking to imagine the three legs dancing and interacting with one another, but that is what they do!

So, let's make a brief exploration of societal threefolding from four perspectives: organisational; personal experience; social science and the human body as a threefold system itself.

Firstly, organisations reflect the make up of the human being. Human beings can be seen as threefold, having a physical body, an inner life of experience or soul and an identity that enables us to say 'I' to ourselves as the centre of our experience. So, also, organisations can be seen as having a threefold structure. You can recognise the 'essence', 'spirit' or 'identity' of an organisation as expressed by its purpose, mission, guiding values and story. The 'soul' of the organisation is expressed in the patterns and quality of relationships forming its structure. The 'body' can be seen in the life processes, energy, activities, buildings, equipment and the physical resources of an organisation.

Secondly, we experience threefolding ourselves. As human beings we think, we feel and we have the will to take action. Thinking, feeling and willing are alive in our relationships. In conversation with others, we exchange ideas, feel likes and dislikes and notice our intentions for action. In groups of people, thinking is shared through the content of what is said; the will of the group members is expressed through the procedure and the purpose; feeling is expressed through the interaction of speaking and listening.

Thirdly, some social scientists research societies using a threefold lens. As a social anthropologist, I found value in researching what forms a society, community, or people through their cultural, political and economic systems.

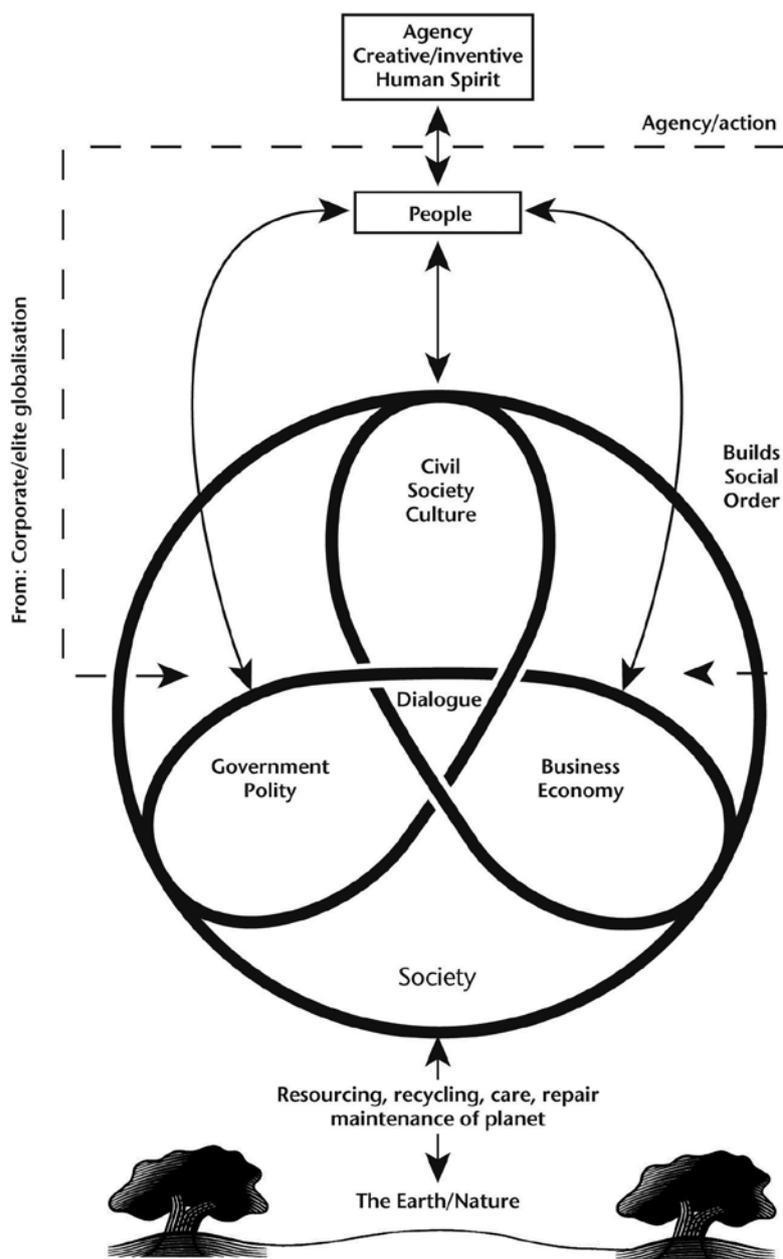
Fourthly, studying the human body can help understand the dynamics of society. A simple picture of how the body works is that of 'head, heart and hands'. Anatomically, the body has a threefold structure formed from the dynamic yet semi-autonomous interaction of the head (the nervous and senses system), heart (circulatory and breathing systems) and limbs (metabolic system, including digestion and so on).⁷

Several conclusions can be drawn from observing the human organism:

1. There is no organic centralisation as such. No one organic system dominates in a healthy body. Three functionally independent yet interacting systems sustain the human body. There is no organic command and control system in overall charge. Of course non-organic forces are at work, not least the human 'I' the authentic kernel of our true selves – that by which I can say to myself: 'I am'.
2. Each organic system has a special, unique relationship with the world. The head connects with the world by means of the senses; breathing links the circulatory system and our lungs to the air; and the metabolic system relates to the world through taking in and digesting substances and through the movement of the limbs.
3. Each system works semi-autonomously, controlling its own unique functions, whilst keeping the other two systems informed and supported.
4. Bodily health is maintained by feedback that keeps each system from overstepping its boundaries. Under- and over-active systems produce ill health. So an over-active stomach can cause a headache, for example.

Such insights can be used as a lens to help deepen our understanding of the dynamic workings of society. There are three autonomous, but interacting systems or 'legs' – albeit interacting, dancing ones! One 'leg' is the economy, with the market as the home territory of business. The economy serves human needs by producing, distributing and consuming goods, services and commodities (such as lumber, oil, electricity, etc.). Whether as producers, distributors or consumers, we all participate in the economic system. Goods acquire value through people's needs, when trading products for money. In contrast to the frame of naked free market competition ('survival of the fittest' in an all out competition for profit), business in a threefold sense is collaborative. It is based on relationships, on human interest, trust, credit, confidence and mutuality. For example, with community-supported agriculture or in Fair Trade organisations where producers, suppliers and consumers agree fair prices and commit to long-term producer/consumer relationships,

A second 'leg' is the political system or polity, the home territory of the state, government or public sector. This is concerned with civil, cultural and economic rights backed up by the law, regulation, security and political life. We engage as citizens and elect representatives to pass laws, agree civil rights and entitlements, to develop policy, choose a government and a judiciary, as



talents. Civil society and cultural organisations are on home ground in the cultural system, with their stress on values, empowerment, advocacy of policies to the public sector, innovation with exemplar projects providing services. The freer people are to develop their talents, make the most of their abilities, get the health care they need, develop their sense of meaning, values and purpose in life, the more they can contribute positively to a vibrant cultural life, a living economy and a resilient polity. And the converse applies. Think of the lifelong cost to society of people who have not had a whole education, which helps them make the most of their potential. For example many of the 80,000 British prisoners will re-offend, partly because a significant number are barely literate, mentally unstable and have not had the training to get jobs. They just get punished, rather than rehabilitated. If you bemoan the cost of education, just consider the cost of ignorance.

Culture as it manifests in society thrives on freedom, on initiative, experimentation and exploration. Whether it is in the fields of education, science, technology, health, spirituality, religion or in personal growth, the more freedom there is, the more vibrant will be people's creative human contributions.

Examples and openings

The green shoots of a 'common wealth' society are emerging here and there, though much is below the corporate media radar. 'Commonwealth' is an old word for society, used still for countries like the 'Commonwealth of Canada' or of Pennsylvania. It is linked to 'commonweal', meaning health, wellbeing, human security and the common good. 'There is no weal but commonweal' as the old saying goes.

One image of the emerging commonwealth society is that it is rather like benign 'guerrilla gardening'. 'Guerrilla' gardeners across the UK and the USA are quietly transforming waste lots into convivial spaces, an example of which can be found in the north of England at Todmorden in Yorkshire, the home of the 'incredible edible' movement with productive food growing breaking out everywhere. In New York, hundreds of community gardens on waste lots have transformed parts of the cityscape. One of Steiner's ideas was that social threefolding is present as a potential, pressing into life. Action is strengthened when we hold, as a guiding light, principles like societal threefolding. We have, potentially, an intuitive grasp of the healthy development conditions for culture, rights and economics, so we can surface this as a guide. So people usually 'get it' when I was fundraising for the Biodynamic Land Trust and suggest that biodynamic farms are to be understood as

well as ensuring security. This sphere is concerned with equality, where the law ensures we all have the same rights.

The state makes sure that business works within the legal frameworks of environmental, health, privacy, intellectual copyright and labour laws, for example. It ensures equality. The essence of political life is the regulation of relationships between people according to a sense of fairness, a sense for what is right, of social justice. This activity is akin to the human heart and circulatory system, which tirelessly senses the health of the whole body and brings rhythm and transports nutrients throughout the body. Without such regulation by the public sector, some businesses might, for example, simply impose cripplingly low wages for their workers, or dump waste, indiscriminately, on the environment.

Lastly, the economic and political systems are nurtured and renewed by the creative cultural system, by people contributing their work, capacities and

more cultural and social enterprises than just ordinary businesses. Or, like Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826, an American Founding Father and the principal author of the Declaration of Independence), they think there should be a wall, a boundary, between the state and religion.

You can understand what the Filipino activist and writer Nicanor Perlas calls 'de facto social threefolding'. People can draw intuitively on threefolding principles as these make practical sense, without ever having heard of social threefolding. People have deep-rooted instincts for respecting the boundaries between the three systems. For example, people intuitively understand water to be a commons, a 'common pool resource', and a right. They just know it's not a commodity to be bought and sold for profit. Hence water provision should be mutually delivered, a public utility rather than privatised (as in the UK) as a commodity for profit. The UK's National Health Service, free at the point of delivery, has massive support as people recognise that healthcare does not work at all well as a profit making business. There are moral limits to markets. There are things money can't buy. People in the UK freely donate blood out of solidarity with the NHS as a shared social project. Strikingly, Richard Titmuss's research in *'The Gift Relationship'* compared blood donation with commercial systems, and found that giving resulted in healthier, timelier and cheaper blood.⁸

Many people consider that the profit motive in health both feels wrong and costs more, as it undermines health professionals' ethical motivation. Before the advent of market fundamentalism, many public services were run semi-autonomously, with minimal political or commercial overstepping of boundaries. Where attempts have been made to marketise through charging tuition in university education in England, overall costs have gone up dramatically, creating more student debt. Free university education in Britain used to be a right, but, rather paradoxically, as market fundamentalist 'solutions' make things worse in previously 'free' health and education areas, more people wake up to alternative thinking about what to do. There is currently a debate in the USA whether student loans should be forgiven, as repaying debt is lowering consumer buying power!

Another area where social threefolding principles can be useful is to understand how business, government and cultural organisations, which, from our threefold way of looking at things when they keep within their boundaries and respect the other two sectors, can be more successful. One positive opening here is 'social' businesses, which are pioneering an emerging generative economy. Consider some examples from around the world. Aravind in Tamil Nadu in India is a world class ophthalmic family company that delivers high quality eye health care free to the poor that is cross-subsidised by fees from the more well off. It connects with the work of the global charity, Sightsavers International. Then there is the Danish company Novo Nordisk that produces 40% of the world's insulin, with

\$11 billion per annum sales. It is protected as a business from the stock market, as the founders put the company into a charitable foundation. Based at Kalundborg, near Copenhagen, Novo Nordisk is part of a world famous ecosystem for industrial ecology and symbiosis, where waste from one company is used by another, in this case its surplus heat going to the city's district heating system.⁹ Community supported agriculture (CSA), where consumers commit to supporting farms and fair prices, has become a worldwide movement, an associative economic alternative to the supermarket system where farmers are paid low prices – and often dictated to about what to grow – so that food can be sold in bulk, cheaply to the wider population, reinforcing the monopoly of supermarkets.

Then, at the heart of society where we are citizens, we find the renewal of our democracy through our rights and responsibilities. A varied toolkit of representative and participative democratic processes is developing that involves people in the political decisions that affect them. These build connection, capacity, leadership, skills and inclusion. Innovative city councils are engaging people with citizens juries, assemblies and inquiries to deliberate policies, participative budgeting where citizens can choose priorities for public investment, dialogue by design where both face to face and online people develop plans, say for handling waste in London, community organising and development. Effective city leaders work with civil society, business and the statutory sectors. Senator Bernie Sanders (who ran this year as a potential US president), was the former mayor of Burlington, Vermont and back in 2003 his then mayoral successor, Peter Clavelle, told me how he saw his work at the heart of the community:

"As the city government, we create a social, economic and cultural plan in dialogue with civil society and the business sector. Our annual budget is passed – often argued line-by-line overnight – in the Town Hall Meeting by citizens. When there was a housing need we set up an independent, non-profit civil society provider, the Burlington Community Land Trust, to deliver our social housing programme in partnership with the city. So we channel a housing sales tax to the CLT, and our city pension fund invests in it. What happens if there is a new need? Well, a while back a small group wanted to set up a women's refuge, I said, 'Fine. Come back in a month with more supporters and present your plans to the Councillors at the next town meeting. If they support your proposal, we will work with you to help develop the plan, get you start up funding, and help you become viable as a civil society organisation providing this service.'¹⁰

Civil society in Britain has imported community organising from the USA. London Citizens are pioneering community land trusts and a living wage.¹¹ They hold Citizen's Assemblies where they dialogue with the Mayor, business and politicians and hold national election Assemblies.

Finally, there are many examples and openings for

creative, cultural and civil society renewal, and for asserting the autonomy of cultural institutions. The American author Rebecca Solnit describes how, in disasters, people turn to community self-organising, as if by instinct, when the situation demands it. In the UK *The Guardian* newspaper's editorial freedom is secured by being owned by a charity; similarly with Public Service Broadcasting in the USA with member subscribers. Just think how much free software, such as the Linux operating system, Firefox internet browser and the Adobe electronic file reader, to name but a few of the myriad applications available, have been developed and then given by individuals working for the common good, for free use in the Internet commons, in sharp contrast to corporately owned and leased software.

When social threefolding is used *consciously*, development is strengthened. Using principles you understand and know work is quite different from just following recipes.

Conclusion

A commonwealth society is emerging as an alternative to market fundamentalist society. Drawing on social threefolding, there are four unfolding stories: the mother earth-care story, the cultural freedom story, the story of equality and human rights, and story of economic collaboration, of mutuality, of shared prosperity.

We have come a long way already. Back in the 1980's, the UK's then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher said there was "no such thing as society", only self-seeking individuals and their families. For her, 'the market' should dominate the political and cultural spaces of society and she unleashed market fundamentalism. However, de facto social threefolding emerged from the market fundamentalist and communist strangleholds when civil society emerged as a global power. Civil society activists helped to bring down Eastern European communist governments, culminating in the November 1989 toppling of the Berlin Wall and with it Russian communism. A decade later, global social movements successfully opposed the World Trade Organisation's bid to allow corporations to rule the world at Seattle in 1999. The emerging societal power of civil society asserted itself as a countervailing power to business and the state. This continues with the now successful campaign against the Trans Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) with its proposed secret investor/state tribunals for awarding corporations compensation for profits lost through environmental or health legislation.

We are at a breakthrough point. Whilst we can oppose what we don't want, we can also ask: *What kind of society do we want, and how do we get there?* Steiner's social threefolding vision can give timely help as a guide for analysis and action. There are green shoots everywhere to learn from and build on, starting from where you are. Fear for what the future holds can also be a wake up call, however there are many signs of hope. We can support our commonwealth society, our social future, as

it emerges.

The breakdown of the 'greed is good', neo-liberal, market fundamentalist ideology has opened up space for new thinking and action. Many more people are now inquiring and active. In 2009 Yukio Hatoyama, the former prime minister of Japan, asked how we could push back market fundamentalism, advocating the guiding principle of fraternity to counter balance unleashed free market capitalism:

"How can we put an end to unrestrained market fundamentalism and financial capitalism, that are void of morals or moderation, in order to protect the finances and livelihoods of our citizens? That is the issue we are now facing... In these times, we must return to the idea of fraternity — as in the French slogan '*liberté, égalité, fraternité*' — as a force for moderating the danger inherent within freedom."

Martin Large from Stroud, England, will be doing a research and lecture tour on social threefolding and land trusts in the USA from 1-22 November 2016.

For more details see:

www.buildingcommonweal.wordpress.com

Endnotes

1. *New View*, issue 80, Summer 2016
2. The 'Fourteen Points' was a statement of principles for world peace that was to be used for peace negotiations in order to end World War I. The principles were outlined in a January 8, 1918 speech on war aims and peace terms to the United States Congress by President Woodrow Wilson.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fourteen_Points
3. Quoted in Edward Udell, *Rudolf Steiner on the World Stage: Social Threefolding During and after World War I*, *New View* Summer 2016, p.53.
4. Rudolf Steiner to Clara Michel in *Rudolf Steiner's Millenium Prophecies* by Heinz Herbert Schöffler, Henry Goulden Books, 2007. The full quotation is: "The Threefold Commonwealth is completely done for in this century. It cannot become a reality. It will again be possible at the beginning of the coming century when a window of the spiritual world will open in order to make it possible."
5. Neo-liberalism refers primarily to the 20th century resurgence of 19th century ideas particularly associated with *laissez-faire* economic liberalism (an approach that encourages business transactions between private parties free from any government interference, such as regulations, etc.).
6. The word 'commons' derives from the historical concept of Common Land. Today in the UK (but also in other countries) it is historical land that has remained largely undisturbed through the centuries, a remnant of medieval times when people relied on commons (as the common land was called) for their survival, for they had the right to graze their animals upon it. See <http://www.oss.org>.

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- uk/what-we-do/commons/. Community Land Trusts are a way of creating and vouchsafing new 'common land' for specific purposes and communities.
7. See Large, M., *Common Wealth*, 2010 p38-45, and also Rohen, J., *Functional Threefoldness in the Human Organism and Human Society*, Adonis, Spring Valley, New York, 2011, for a very thorough analysis and description of the threefold structure of the human body by the founder of functional anatomy.
 8. See Titmuss, Richard, *The Gift Relationship: From Human Blood to Social Policy*, 1970.
 9. Kelly, Marjorie, *Owning Our Future: the emerging Ownership Revolution*, Berret Kohler, San Francisco 2012
 10. See Large M., *Common Wealth*, *ibid.*
 11. The Living Wage is calculated by independent bodies according to the basic cost of living in the country; currently in the UK it is £8.25. Employers can choose to pay this voluntarily. This is different from the statutory minimum wage, enforced in law, which currently stands at £7.20 for adults over 25 years old.

[First published in *New View* magazine, issue 81, Autumn 2016]
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