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A New Proposal for Guild Organisation

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How many Guild Socialists and Credit reformers have read the *Threefold Commonwealth* or, having read it, how many of them have been struck by the fact that it is a conception of the State giving perfect scope for the development of autonomous Guilds, and strongly suggestive of Communal [Social] Credit? Rudolf Steiner was a Theosophist, which means a thinker of a kind not likely to appeal to the typical student of economics. But the interest of this work went far beyond the limits of theosophy. It was read by plenipotentiaries at the Peace Conference [Versailles 1918], and translated into nearly every European language. Its conception of the State is startling and illuminating.

The Commonwealth of Man is here presented as something threefold in its essential nature, which ought to be *threefold* in its conception and actual organisation. As the theme is developed we see that it is not a new idea, in the sense that it is no arbitrary scheme which the writer has in mind, but a threefoldness in the very nature of human association *per se*. It exists whether we recognise it or not. But, if we do not recognise it, we cannot frame social institutions that will succeed. On the other hand, if we perceive its reality, we are impelled to ideas most constructive for modern social life. It is not that it suggests a Utopia, nor any ready-made scheme for social salvation, which a despot or dictator could usefully impose from above. Indeed, it reveals more closely than ever, that the fact that we still produce Utopian ideas is an evidence of our worst weakness – the unreality of modern thought. “A practical thinker of today,” wrote Steiner, “recognises, as one of the experiences of public life, that nothing can be done with a Utopian idea, however convincing it may be in its appearance.” He denied that his own work, the *Threefold Commonwealth*, was of a Utopian character. His aim in that book was to reveal fallacies that lie at the foundations of present social conceptions, both radical and reactionary. It is the present way of thinking that is the cause of the present dilemma – or, at all events of our inability to resolve it. It is our mode of thought which is remote from life. The modern spirit – our life of the spirit – is at fault.

For modern man has evolved a life of the spirit which is very largely under the influence of economic forces and of the State. From childhood his thought is moulded in institutions trammelled impalpably but surely by considerations of State, and by industrial requirements. Few question the wisdom of it. Was not the taking over of education by the State one of the great landmarks of human progress? Not so. It was but the means, necessary but regrettable, to universal schooling. The entire system of teaching, involved as it is with the very roots of the spiritual life, needs absolute autonomy for the health of the Commonwealth.

Teachers alone should manage the business of teaching, learned faculties the organisation of knowledge. None of the forces at work in State or industry should have any interference in this management. This idea is revolutionary. But the very prejudice which

it calls forth is evidence of its need. For what would be the instant objection in the modern mind to such a proposal, if seriously made a matter of practical politics? It would be an objection, more or less conscious, based on disbelief that the educator has enough practical wisdom to direct his own work. It would meet with an unconscious persuasion that an educator must, almost by the necessity of his calling, be an unpractical person, remote from realities. And no doubt educationists are so. But they are so because, unlike other men of affairs, they are compelled to work upon lines laid down for them. And what is to be expected of us, nourished in mind by persons whose way of thought is generally believed to be remote from life? Is it not almost a necessity that our habits of thought should be similarly unreal and abstracted? How can we tackle problems of such a grim reality as our social problem of today? What Steiner claims for the educational life is its emancipation into a *Free spiritual life* of as much dignity and autonomy as the State itself. If we could rise to such a conception, we should already be in a position to solve the socio-economic problem of our times. It is because the Government and industry trammel the spiritual life that the spirit of man feels incapable of making *them* serve his life, and feels they are enslaving him.

But it is not proposed that the spiritual life and its autonomous organisation should have any priority over the political State. The contention of Steiner is that it ought to enjoy equality. The spiritual, the political, and the economic faculties of the Commonwealth each require independent development. That is the idea of the threefold Commonwealth. Its three constituent faculties, where their agreement is required for the good of the whole Commonwealth, confer together as equals in a diplomatic relation. But all matters falling within their own jurisdiction they order by the principles of their own life, without any darkening of counsel by arguments derived from another plane of existence. The three faculties will be perfectly united, for every man combines them in his own person, being related to life in all three ways.

There are persons who will honestly find it difficult to see the reason or advantage in this new conception of the State. Such persons will not have observed how the modern paralysis of will in the face of modern problems is very largely due to the fact that life in a modern democracy gives no help, by the nature of its constitution, to clearness of thought upon any of its problems. On the contrary, it throws every question into the arena of discussion to be worried from all points of view at once. There is a dearth of true conceptions concerning human rights, human culture, and human economic needs; because these never get a chance to develop separately and in harmony with themselves.

It is not the fashion to think, and it is unpopular to suggest that the present social problem of the workers' revolt is due to a general inability to think with right relation to the facts. We prefer to believe in a physical cause – the growth of industrial machinery. Of course, that growth, unregulated as it has been, is a great modern problem in itself. And yet, when one observes the working class revolt closely, one sees that the great motor nerve of its being is a particular system of thoughts. It is a *trend of thought* which has become the centre of the spiritual life of the workers as a class; a trend of thought which they have inherited from the ruling classes, to whom it meant not much, but to the workers it has become a dynamical impulse and a faith. The materialist philosophy of the last

century, which was but an interesting ideology to the ruling classes, became, when applied to the problem of the workers, the very faith, the religion, the way of salvation.

Those who keep in touch with Labour opinion, or Labour thinkers themselves, would be the first to disbelieve that there is any force in ideas and thoughts of themselves that could contribute a resolving force to the grim deadlock between the classes of society. To say that there is anything which could help them in a purely spiritual movement would be regarded as mere ideology, if not worse. Inevitably so, because from the point of view of the materialist philosophy all that there is in the spiritual life is only ideology, a mere reflected glitter of material facts. Yet it is clear to anyone who knows something of the minds of intelligent insurgents among the workers that the dynamic of their own movement is in thoughts – thoughts which have become their spiritual life, which nevertheless they are obliged to feel as only ideology. The way of salvation allowed to the proletarian by his new way of thought is *class-consciousness* – that is the highest conception he can really believe in. But as it is a *human* consciousness to which he truly aspires, this gives him but a miserable religion. There is real unhappiness in the proletarian life.

I have dealt at some length with this, Steiner's criticism of modern economic thought. It shows how a way of thinking is at the root of our social disharmony, which disharmony cannot be resolved until the way of thought is changed, either by the cruelty of events without or by the vigour of spiritual movement within. The idea that all spiritual life is more or less unreal ideology could never have come into being in a community where the life of the spirit was free and independent. It results from – or at least goes with – its bondage to State and industry.

At present a despotic severance of education from the State might be of little immediate value, for the spiritual life had lost its power of self-synthesis. The various spiritual and educational bodies have now no cohesion, and what is required is no less than a voluntary co-operation between all learned and learning institutions whatsoever, with a basis for conference and common expression. It is no light matter to reconstitute an autonomous spiritual life. Yet, without it, the Community cannot evince its threefold nature, and without this threefoldness clearly expressed in actual organisation, modern democracy cannot understand its own nature. Yet we look to democracy to create the State of the future! Thus the autonomous re-creation of the spiritual life, by itself and for itself, is a condition of the existence of any future democracy. Not that it has any priority over the economic or the political faculties. But the position of each of these in the threefold organisation will require a separate discussion.