Chapter 6
The Social and Political Aspects of Education

Abstract Steiner considered the free unfoldment of individuality to be the essential task of education. This requires more freedom from state rules and regulations than is the case for schools in most modern societies. Its creative nature makes education part of cultural life; it does not belong to the state or government organisation. Government organisation and cultural life are, or should be, two relatively independent realms of society; the third realm is economy. These three social realms should be based on the three social values we have inherited from the French revolution: equality in the state, freedom in culture and solidarity in economy. This is the basic view of Steiner's so-called social threefoldness. Steiner saw cultural life in general, and education in particular, as disempowered by the penetration of state and economy. Parallels to this view can be found in present-day social and political philosophy, such as that of Habermas and Cohen & Arato, where the cultural lifeworld and civil society are understood as illegitimately colonised by state and economic power, and in need of greater autonomy in order to liberate human creative forces. However, international agencies like the OECD have further increased the political influence of the state on education, eroding the professional knowledge base of teachers and turning them more into bureaucrats than creative artists.

Keywords Social threefoldness · Cultural lifeworld · Civil society · Individualism · School organisation

6.1 The Essential Task of Education and the Nature of Modern Society

Already in 1893, Steiner expressed his idea of the essential task of education to be the free unfoldment of individuality, which for him was the sole reality in the realm of culture (1989a [GA 30], p. 67). He considered this to be not merely a subjective ideal on his part, but an objective trend in modern social life that would grow stronger with time. There is a longing for the free cultivation and development of

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the individuality inherent in human nature. Steiner even states that in our age nobody should be forced to learn things by going to school; the teachers' task is not to implant knowledge content into the minds of children; it is to awaken their own desire to understand, their own longing for knowledge. In this way, education can still take place in an atmosphere of freedom (1994 [GA 4a], p. 247).

The strong drive towards individuality is inevitable, but it also has its negative side, which is an increase of antipathy in social life. Sympathy and antipathy are the two basic forces in the human soul; they are in a way 'given' by nature (Steiner 1983 [GA 21]). We cannot prevent immediate reactions of 'likes and dislikes' to arise, but we can learn to handle them more or less skilfully. In social life, sympathy is the force that binds us to other people, whereas antipathy makes us take a distance and affirm our autonomy and independence. If the latter tendency dominates and is unchecked, we risk ending up in a society of isolated individuals, in which feelings of community and solidarity with other people are sinking to levels below what is necessary for a sound and happy social life. John Dewey called this atomistic individualism and recognised its symptoms in American society almost a hundred years ago, warning for its social and moral consequences (Dewey 1981; pp. 575ff). According to Steiner's spiritual geography, the forces of individualism (and economism) are strongest in the Far West, so they would appear there first. In the East, there is more of collectivism and theocracy.[1]

It is interesting—and terrible—to see that the notion of individual freedom in education can easily be linked with present-day developments in information technology and communication technology. Thus, a recent article in *Die Zeit*, with the title 'A teacher for me alone' (Breithaupt 2016),[2] extols the future possibility of each student being connected to a computer that, on the basis of the student's neurological and physiological data, suggests what kind of learning activities they could profitably engage in: 'What about Maths? I see on your gaze and on your blood pressure that you are very focused right now', the computer suggests. A short interaction between the student and the computer ensues, ending with the computer saying that if the student solves the problem within 17 min s/he will be raised one level. The example so far exists only in imagination, but it shows how the idea of an education focused on individuality can be—already has been, to a certain extent—hijacked by technological (and economic) interests, thereby in fact turning it into its very opposite. It makes the student part of an impersonal technological system; a system based on values that derive from social and political interests, and not at all on the individuality of the student. In 2036, prophesies Breithaupt (ibid.), parents will book a 'virtual teacher' for their 5-year olds, and the voice of the computer will accompany us throughout our lives.

[1]This is obvious when looking at the history of Eastern societies, and it is still largely the case today, even though in China the bizarre mixture of state or semi-state capitalism and communist ideology (a form of cultural power) is almost overreaching itself (cf. Walter and Howie 2012). The worship of Chairman Mao was obviously in form not very different from that of the Divine Emperors in earlier history.

[2]The author, Fritz Breithaupt, is professor of Germanistics at the Indiana University, US.

The visions of Breithaupt and his likes go against the grain of everything that Steiner strived for in the educational realm. The efforts that he made on behalf of education were part of his work for social reform (Steiner 1997),[3] and as we have seen his view was that the renewal of society must be based on spiritual insight (above, Chap. 2). After World War I, the social and political situation of Germany was one of crisis in almost all respects. There was a great need for new ideas and new directions. It was in this time that Steiner tried to get a hearing among influential persons, as well as among people in general, for his vision of a three-folded society (1976 [GA 23]). He made great efforts to contact politicians and other influential people that he thought could appreciate this idea for a new organisation of society.[4] The basic principles of his vision are very simple. Modern societies are constituted by three different spheres or realms, which interact in all kinds of complex ways. One realm is that of *the state.* It is the realm of politics and power, and its main function is to constitute, enact and uphold the laws of the nation. The second realm is *economy* or 'the market'. In this realm, people produce things and sell them; it is the sphere of economical interchange and business transactions. The third realm is *culture*; this is the realm of art, science and religion, but not only that. Basically, culture is the realm of human creativity, learning and development. In traditional societies, culture is the sphere in which people seek connection to the spiritual world, which can take many forms, all of which are expressions of human creativity. Such expressions are of course still alive in modern societies, but the realms of scientific research, linked with technological inventions (and economical production), have come to play an ever-greater role.

The idea that societies consist of three realms, simply expressed as the state, the market and culture, is rather common in present sociology and political science. They have been called the great institutional metaphors of the modern world (Scott 1998). However, for Steiner they are not just metaphors. They are relatively independent realms of social functions, which are equally important but essentially different. In explaining his views of the nature and interactions between these three realms, Steiner claims that he is not propagating a new political ideology, but *reading the trends of the times*, or at least some of the trends; the *essential* ones from a human/spiritual point of view. He is not only describing facts; he is also trying to express the hidden virtual forces behind surface appearances. Some of these forces emerged in European social life already with the French revolution: the well-known ideals of *freedom*, *equality,* and 'brotherhood' or *solidarity*; ideals that since then have been central to many political reforms and revolutions, but still await their full realisation.

[3]This book consists of a selection of lectures from GA 192, 296 and 330-31. They deal extensively with the educational aspects of social threefoldness.

[4]Among the people that Steiner contacted were Richard von Kühlmann (German minister of Foreign Affairs), Arthur Polzer-Hoditz (counsellor to the Austrian emperor), Maximilan von Baden (cousin of the German emperor Wilhelm II) and Wilhelm von Blume (professor of State Law) (Kühn 1978; Lindenberg 1997).

The crucial idea of Steiner's vision of a threefold social order is that there is an essential correspondence between these three ideals and the three social realms: freedom is/should be the basic principle of cultural life; equality (before the law) is/should be the basic principle of the state (which constitute and maintain the rule of law); and solidarity is/should be the basic principle of economic life. Thus, the freedom and individualism of cultural life are counterbalanced by solidarity and community in economic life. In present-day capitalist economy, this kind of solidarity is to a large extent lacking; thus, individualism (or a distorted version of it) is allowed free rein in a basically consumerist culture.

If Steiner's vision of a threefold social order is accepted, one arrives at a standpoint which accommodates both liberalist and socialist/communist values: liberalism becomes the politics of culture, and socialist values rule in economy (as for equality before the law, it is presumably common to both of these ideologies, at least in theory).[5] The main mistake in liberalism is the extension of the ideal of freedom too far into the *economic* sphere, ending up with more or less ruthless forms of capitalism (social liberalism tries to contain the negative consequences of economic freedom). Especially in neoliberalism, freedom is strongly linked with *competition* in the economic sphere; i.e., the very opposite of solidarity. For Friedrich Hayek—the guru of economy behind the policies of Margret Thatcher in the beginning of the 1980s—competition was not only an economical principle but also a means of shaping a certain entrepreneurial mindset (Hayek 1973). However, from Steiner's point of view, competition belongs to the cultural sphere. Cultural life is partly a battle of ideas, ideals and values.What results from these battles is not only artistic work, but also new ideas for economic as well as political life. In Steiner's time, the obstacle for right-wing politicians to accept Steiner's view was its outspoken individualism. The conservative view was that the individual should merge with the nation, as the fundamental, ideal unit. Liberals, on their part, did not like the syndicalist tendencies implicit in Steiner's ideas for the organisation of economic life.

Socialism and communism are characterised by two other mistakes: the first is to let the state and the economy merge completely (communism), or partially (socialism); the consequences are more or less complete forms of *state capitalism*, which partly tend to have similar negative consequences as its liberal counterpart

[5]As will soon be clear, Steiner did not mean that the state should own the means of production and be an employer of workers. He rather envisaged economical life as organised on the cooperative principle: that consumers and producers unite in associations based on solidarity. As for the means of production, he suggested the *right of use* to replace the right of ownership. This requires the economic sphere to be transformed from a capitalist profit economy to an economy of solidarity, so that human individuality can flourish also in this field of life. According to Steiner, we make a big mistake by linking *wages* to *work*, since this inevitably turns human capacities into commodities. Consequently, the human being also becomes a commodity (here Steiner agrees with Marx, although he never refers to him in this context). But all human beings have the right to the economic means for fulfilling their basic needs, whether they are employed or not. Although Steiner never said so explicitly, the necessary consequence seems to be that a basic income must be guaranteed for all—an idea that has grown stronger in recent times (cf. Van Parijs 2001).

(in addition to other ones). The second mistake is the extension of the ideal of equality too far into the *cultural* sphere, resulting in oppression of individuality and creativity. Equality is then taken to mean more than just equality before the law; it comes to mean that all human beings are, or should, in some significant ways be 'the same'. However, in Steiner's time, the main obstacle for left-wing politicians to accept Steiner's view was their adherence to the idea of the class struggle; they could not accept collaboration with capitalists.

Another misunderstanding—one that tends to be common to both left- and right-wing ideologies, although more often explicitly expressed in the latter—is the linking together of *state* and *ethnicity*; hence the idea of *national* states (cf. Cassirer 1961). This idea arose in Western culture towards the end of the eighteenth century and was expressed by, for instance, Rousseau. It became the seed for the national Romantic movement that inspired people's wars of liberation in many parts of Europe. It was also a basic principle proclaimed by President Wilson in the peace negotiations after WW1. Each large enough ethnic population had the right to its own independent state. If these states were based on democratic principles, this arrangement would be a peace creating factor for the future. One wonders why Wilson did not consider this to apply to the USA, which is founded on a completely different principle—one that agrees with Steiner's view: the state, as the realm of equality, has nothing to do with ethnical identities: *all* are equal before the law.[6] Steiner considered Wilson's ideas and his role in the peace negotiations as catastrophic for their outcomes.

The three social realms, even though essentially different in nature, are not isolated from each other by watertight sheds. Just as the nervous system, the metabolism and the blood circulation interact on all levels of the human being, so do economy, culture and state (laws and regulations) interact in all social institutions and practices. The basic task of the state is to regulate their interaction in the most fruitful way for all citizens; striving for the fullest possible realisation of all the three values inherited from the French revolution. However, Steiner did not formulate any program for *how* this should be done. Some may perceive this as a weakness, but it is completely in accord with his democratic stance. If the majority of people accepted the soundness of the basic ideas, then the solutions to all the practical issues should not be dictated from above, but emerge out of the creative deliberations of the citizens themselves, and finally constituted as laws by the state.[7]

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[6]As Habermas (1992) argues, nationalism could be fruitfully replaced by 'constitutional patriotism'.

[7]In 1919–1920, Steiner and some of his followers did extensive public lecturing on the ideas of the threefold social order (published in GA 328-334). Steiner's lectures were rather popular, particularly in Württemberg, where they were often overfull, and they were reviewed in the daily press (Kühn 1978). Nevertheless, the movement for a threefold social order never became as large and influential as Steiner hoped for. Apart from criticisms, fabricated and false allegations were often published in the press, which made Steiner talk about 'factories of forged letters' that were sent to newspaper editors as 'authentic information' (1992 [GA 196], p. 83)—the machinations of fake news were operating already at that time.

This is an example of how the freedom of cultural creativity would inform the law constituting activity of the state.

6.2 Culture, Lifeworld and Civil Society

It would lead too far to go into all the details of Steiner's reasoning around the three social spheres and their basic ideals. It may, however, be worthwhile to point to certain parallels between Steiner and present-day social and political philosophy.[8] This would in a sense confirm Steiner's claim that what he proposed was not a mere ideology, but a way of understanding the nature of modern society and its potential development.

An interesting analysis of the three social realms, and how they relate to each other in modern capitalist society, is that of the early Habermas (1990 [1962]). For Habermas, all societies need the three basic functions of *power*, *production* and *reproduction.* In modern societies, power is obviously the function of the state, and production that of the economic sphere. Reproduction entails the upholding and transmission of knowledge, norms and values, but also the restoration of health and ability to work. These functions at least partially overlap with those of culture in Steiner's sense (see further below); what is missing is Steiner's strong emphasis on individuality and creativity. However, Habermas also warns that what he called the 'cultural lifeworld'—the everyday world of human interaction, which is and must be the basis of all social practices—is threatened by erosion, and in need of emancipation from the 'system world'. The latter, consisting of the state apparatus in union with industrial enterprises, business corporations and ever more advanced technological systems, tends to illegitimately colonise the lifeworld and its various

[8]It may be noted in passing that the view of society as threefolded goes a long way back. In ancient times, there were three types of gods perceived as ruling the three basic social functions of power/wisdom, production/fertility and war (sic!) (the latter was then more an aspect of culture than of power) (see further Dahlin 2006). In the seventieth century, Comenius also envisioned a threefold division of society. He named the three spheres *religion*, *culture* and *politics/economy* (Blekastad 1977). They should be organised as three relatively independent realms although every citizen partakes in a natural way in all three spheres. This was an important step in the historical development of conceptions of the social order. In older times, the individual was understood as belonging to only one of the three realms, like in Plato, or the Hindu caste system. Comenius also suggested that the three realms should be organised transnationally and separately, in a World Council of Churches including all religions; a 'Collegium Lucis' for the cultural life of the whole world (an idea that inspired the creation of UNESCO); and a supranational court of justice for political conflicts. These worldwide institutions should be based upon three principal values: that of the *equal value of all souls* in the religious and juridical sphere; the principle of the *freedom of spirit* within the cultural sphere; and the principle of *brotherhood* in the sphere of politics and economics (Comenius' conception of politics seems rather simplistic, and his distinction between religion and culture is a bit hard to accept from a modern point of view).

forms of cultural (re-)production (for a longer discussion of the parallels between Steiner and Habermas, see Dahlin 2006).[9]

Another more recent parallel between Steiner and modern thought is that between Steiner's concept of culture and the concept of *civil society*, as defined by some social and political philosophers. The discussions about the notion of civil society intensified in the decades following the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. This great and largely unexpected event raised the question of the role and significance of movements within civil society for bringing it about. Some maintain that a new concept of the *global* civil society grew out of the dialogue between the peace movement in western Europe and the dissident movements in eastern Europe (Kaldo 2003; see also, for example, Perlas and Strawe 2003). The 'victory of capitalism' opened the gates to a globalisation of the market economy, based on neoliberal principles. A significant reinforcement of the *economic tyranny*, that Steiner actually predicted nearly a hundred years ago, took place (Steiner 1997, p. 151).[10] But this was accompanied by the growth of global activist movements and associations of a non-government and non-profit character (NGO's and NPO's). Non-*government* and non-*profit* means neither state nor market, but the third realm which could be called a civil society on a national and global level.

But the concept of civil society is of course a contested one, and there are different views of what it means. A rough generalisation of the definitions that have been proposed is that those with neoconservative and neoliberal perspectives include everything that does not belong to the state as parts of civil society. Neoliberalism, in particular, tends to assimilate civil society with the economic sphere (Whitty 1997). Socialists and social democrats, in contrast, tend to assimilate civil society to the institutions and structures that are controlled by the state, which, ultimately, means the whole public sphere. There is, however, a third approach: a growing recognition that civil society is a realm that is analytically independent of, and empirically differentiated from, both the state and the market (Alexander 2001).

A civil society concept of this third kind is proposed by Cohen and Arato (1992), who also associate civil society with *freedom*. The rights to communicate and form associations make civil society a sphere of freedom, within which people can discuss issues of public concern and exercise influence on the political and economic spheres. Cohen & Arato's normative and political position constitutes a third approach in relation to on the one hand the neoliberal idea of letting the market rule as much as possible, and on the other the left-winged idea of putting as much as

[9]See also Monbiot (2001) for a powerful analysis of the corporate aspect of a modern capitalist state. Among other things, Monbiot recounts how education came to be viewed as 'a market opportunity' (p. 331).

[10]Steiner (1997; p. 151) characterised the history of Western society since ancient times as moving from a 'priestly tyranny'—a kind of cultural tyranny illustrated by the power of the church in the Middle Ages—over state or political tyranny beginning with the consolidation of the national state in the sixteenth–seventieth century, and moving more and more into economic tyranny, with the development of industrial capitalism at the end of the ninetieth century.

possible under state rule. They wish to warrant the autonomy of both the state and the economy, but at the same time protect civil society from destructive penetration and instrumentalisation by the iron forces of the two other spheres.

This view is obviously similar to that of Steiner's, in that the functions of civil society that Cohen & Arato focus on are part of what Steiner identifies as the cultural sphere. The sphere of culture is threatened by erosion if it is subject to economic tyranny. It needs protection from economic exploitation as well as from state clientisation. Cohen & Arato, on their part, see the concept of civil society as needed for capturing and describing the character of certain phenomena in (post-) modern societies—phenomena that do not belong to the state, nor to the market, but are central for the understanding of the 'crisis of democracy' and how we can work for the improvement of democratic conditions. What they point to is essentially linked to individuality and freedom, the basic values of culture in Steiner's view. As for the NGO's and NPO's making up civil society, state independent schools *not run for economic profit* also belong here, especially if founded on a long and worldwide tradition, such as the Waldorf schools.

6.3 Education as a Cultural Practice

In Steiner's view, schools and education clearly belong to the cultural sphere, at least in modern societies. Steiner recognised the historical role of the state as liberating the educational system from the dominance of the church. But in our time, the state too has played out its role as the ruler of education. Both teaching and learning are creative human activities; therefore, they are *expressions* of individuality, and—especially for the learner—their purpose is to contribute to the further realisation of individuality. As such, they must take place under the condition of freedom. All this places education in the cultural sphere. These aspects of Steiner's social and political philosophy can be compared with the ideas of W. Humboldt (cf. Lejon 1997; p. 96). It was Humboldt's opinion that the economic sphere should *support* cultural life (including schools and education), and the state-run judicial system should *protect* it. But neither the state nor the economy should *control* or *direct* it. Under such conditions, the inherent potential of the individual can be optimally realised in freedom and self-determination (Humboldt 1993).[11]

[11]As Burrow (1993) remarks, Humboldt is perhaps the first political thinker to point out the risk that citizens become more passive the more the state caters for their needs. Thereby he anticipates the kind of critique of the welfare state which holds that it turns its citizens into clients. Humboldt's ideas about limiting the influence and the commitments of the state can at first glance seem identical to the liberal notion of a 'night watch state'. It is, however, hard to equate Humboldt's political ideas with such an extreme liberalism, because his ideal society also has some socialist aspects (ibid., p xlix–l).

Like Cohen & Arato's view of civil society, Steiner saw culture as the source of all social and political development. Education should be a force for social change (Steiner 1997), but it could be so only if based on a true understanding of the human being and development. He aspired to create a form of education that would foster creative and socially engaged individuals, that would work for the improvement of society and human life. However, one important obstacle to this was the lack of freedom in cultural life, due to its penetration by state and economic forces. In the foreword to the fourth edition (1920) of his book on the threefold social order (1976 [GA 23]), Steiner ascribed the chaos and problems of social life after WW1 to the dependence of the cultural sphere upon the state and the economy. The emancipation of cultural life from these dependencies was for him a question of utmost importance. In a lecture to the workers in the Waldorf-Astoria factory in 1919, Steiner talked about how modern technology and a 'soul-numbing capitalism' tied both the soul and the body of most modern people to economic processes, and thereby limited their perspective on life. Only a few, who were not so strongly bound by immediate necessities, realised that for human well-being and development, cultural life must be emancipated. It would not be possible for human beings to develop their full potential, while at the same time serving the forces coming out of the state and the economy. Therefore, the primary task must be to liberate cultural life (1997, p. 110). The spirit behind these views is not very different from Habermas' critique of how the system world illegitimately colonise the lifeworld (see above).

Because of state laws and regulations, not only are teachers not free to teach according to their understanding and perception of what is needed, but the school as a whole is also not free to organise its work as it finds best. As cultural institutions, schools are best organised on the basis of collegiality, which gives the optimal marginal of freedom to the individual teacher.[12] A school is a mini-society, and it contains within itself the same threefoldness as the whole of society. It has an obvious economic aspect related to the costs of the work it does, and where the money for this comes from (which depends on laws and regulations). Following the principle of solidarity, some Waldorf schools have tried to give wages according to the needs of the individual, not according to workload or formal merits. But this principle is hard to uphold in a society where everything goes against it. As for the government aspect, there are state laws governing the work, but there may also be specific rules decided upon by the college of teachers. Ideally, organisational and administrative questions should be decided on by the whole college of teachers, unanimously. Traditionally, Waldorf schools have therefore no leadership or management in the form of a rector or headmaster. Recently, however, many Waldorf schools have seen themselves obliged to establish such leadership positions, partly because of government regulations, and partly because coming to

[12]This does not mean that there should be no laws at all governing schools and education. But these laws should focus on the conditions of justice under which schools must work, such as the rights of parents/children to choose the form of pedagogy that appeals to them. They should not, for instance, prescribe the forms and contents of teaching and assessment.

decisions based on full participatory collegial democracy is often a time-consuming process, demanding a lot of patience (cf. Stehlik 2014a, b). In our hurried times, it has become an ideal that is hard to uphold.

Steiner's suggestion was that there should be general meetings of all school staff once a week, in which administrative and other common concerns were decided upon. However, above all, these teacher colloquia (*Lehrerkonferenzen*) should be the spiritual heart of the school organism, inspiring teachers to continually learn and develop as human beings (1986 [GA 307], pp. 240f)[13]. Pedagogy and other issues of educational relevance should be studied, and teachers should share their observations and experiences, their problems and their attempts to handle them, so that all are aware of what is going on in the whole school. Steiner also encouraged teachers to be up to date on what is going on in mainstream educational practice and research, and even to occasionally contribute to this realm by publishing. Thus, the teachers' colloquia are part of the cultural life of the school, in addition to the work of each individual teacher with their students.

If the meeting of the teaching staff is the spiritual centre of the school, the parent's meeting with the teacher is of equal importance, but working from the periphery, as it were. Learning to listen to the echo of what comes back to the teacher from the parents must become another source of inspiration for the teacher (Stehlik 2002). The curriculum plans and documents should not be followed slavishly; it may be more important to let one's teaching be inspired by what emerges out of life in and around the school itself. This is an aspect of the necessity for teachers to develop a sense for the needs of our times; a sense which is clouded by state rules and regulations, turning teachers into duty-bound bureaucrats, instead of creative artists (cf. Steiner 1997; p. 97).[14] In present times, following the trends of globalisation in all fields, government interventions in education are reaching new, supra-state levels by the influence of agencies like the OECD (Rizvi and Lingard 2006). As a result of such influences, teachers are losing more and more of their professional knowledge base, having it replaced by detailed syllabuses, and assessment and administrative rules (cf. Ball 2003).

Of course, there is nothing wrong with globalisation as such. Transnational cooperation in the fields of politics, culture and economy are necessary and can contribute positively to the evolution of humanity. It is the hegemony of the economic sphere and the erosion of cultural creativity and freedom that is the problem. Steiner would most certainly have affirmed this. Due to its emphasis on the universally human, as well as on individuality and difference, Waldorf education has the potential of becoming a cosmopolitan education for global citizenship. True cosmopolitanism must mean to think universality *and* difference as *belonging together* (Appiah 2008).

[13]English edition: Steiner (1989b).

[14]The development of this sense has unfortunately remained a rather neglected aspect of Waldorf teacher education, which may have contributed to the relative isolation of Waldorf schools from mainstream educational developments.

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