

**Social Threefolding:
Balancing Society to Meet People's Needs
or, Building Community Around People, not machines, not money**

A single vision can restructure our entire society to create a sustainable balance.

The vision is based on three, so it is usually called threefolding. The three aspects of such a society are familiar: Freedom, Equality, and Brotherhood. The untapped power of this vision is in how society is organized around these values. Social threefolding has already begun to happen, but it is not yet recognized as such, so its power to change is still largely in a state of potential.

What is social threefolding?

Freedom, Equality, and Brotherhood are values that our society already holds dear. Social threefolding raises these values to greater effectiveness by applying them to their appropriate places within society.

The cultural/spiritual area would focus on Freedom in the cultivation and unfolding of human capacities. This sector would include not only the arts and religion but also education, health care, and research. This sector would be society's source of creativity.

The political/rights area would be charged with upholding Equality in the entire society so that every person has an equal right to a decent human existence. This area would also be responsible for stewarding the land that we all depend on.

The economic area would be responsible for upholding Brotherhood. This responsibility is not intuitively obvious until we recognize that the function of a healthy economy is to provide the goods and services needed by all members of society. Major decisions such as prices and quality of goods would be made by associations of people representing all aspects of the economy: producers, distributors, and consumers.

Social threefolding, in its mature form, would have three types of administrations instead of one government. Each administration would be different, organized according to the value in its sphere of influence. Everyone would belong to all three spheres but would probably spend most of their time in one area of their choice. For decisions that involve all three sectors, each sector would send a representative in a way akin to how heads of state now meet for decisions outside their sphere.

Why is separation into three important?

The separation of the three spheres of social threefolding is akin to the separation of church and state that was established, radical for its time, in the United States Constitution. The founding fathers realized that the state should not control people's free choice of religion. In a similar

manner, the state should not control or even influence people's freedom of thought in any area. The reverse relationship also holds: religion should not control the state.

The idea of separation is to create some specialization within society, much as our head, heart, and hands are specialized yet act cooperatively. Just as single-celled creatures need to specialize in order to evolve, society has become complex enough to need specialization for our continued health and progress. Human societies around the world have largely moved beyond kings toward democracies. People have now become individually conscious enough so that, in general, new frameworks of society no longer depend on a single person as ruler.

The democracy that the United States has now is certainly an improvement over having royalty. But we are seeing major breaks in our system. Social illness arises when either one sphere operates contrary to its nature (e.g., the economic sphere does not promote brotherhood, the political sphere does not enforce equal rights or protect the environment) or when one sphere dominates the others (e.g., political and economic influences do not allow the cultural sphere to operate freely).

A case could be made that all of these problems exist in our country. They serve as a wake-up call so that we can consciously recognize and correct what is wrong—hopefully peacefully.

We think of ourselves as a democracy, but money has become our single ruler, influencing or even dictating most of our actions. It has become too important, an end in itself. The original purpose of money was to mirror the value of goods and services in an economy so that society could move beyond the barter system. Money is a human creation, intended to serve our purposes. But we have instead become servants of money. Money in itself now wields power, and the 99% of people are becoming more aware of and resentful of the 1% who have the most money. Money influences our politics—our political rights—to an unhealthy degree. Money influences choices in research, choices in healthcare, and choices in schools. Money, and the economy that generates it, is out of control and continues to grow. It needs to be checked—quickly.

The framework of society should be arranged so that there are checks and balances against any one of the three areas becoming dominant. Just as our founding fathers envisioned how the judicial, executive, and legislative branches could act to check each other's power within the political system, the power of three can be used to bring the entire society into a healthy, dynamic balance.

If threefolding is so important, why don't we already have it?

Our society does not use a threefolding structure now due to history and complacency. We have largely accepted our current structure as it has been given to us from the past. Our laws, our source of protections, originated in Rome, where there was one set of laws for Roman citizens and another set of laws for slaves. Also under Roman law, women were deemed to be the property of

men. As time went on, society remained based on the pattern of one group conquering or dominating another, with laws written by and supportive of the conquerors, the powerful.

What we now have is an economy in which the powerful are the wealthy, and our system is allowing them to become ever more wealthy with no end in sight. Money dominates our lives to an unhealthy degree.

The old laws may have worked well in the past. Ancient Romans and Greeks had more of a group consciousness. But especially beginning with the Renaissance, a more individual consciousness has emerged (note how many individuals' names we recognize from the Renaissance compared to even two hundred years earlier). Humanity has evolved (and continues to evolve). We now need to adopt a new structure for our society that supports our new level of consciousness. This structure will be balanced for all of us, including those who are currently wealthy, and will thereby be sustainable. Such a new system is already trying to assert itself (e.g., B corporations, Fair Trade, cooperatives, community-supported agriculture, open-source software), but the different manifestations are not yet widely recognized as part of the same movement.

How do the values behind social threefolding compare with values held by capitalism and socialism?

Capitalism and socialism are two different ways of organizing society, but they each emphasize one sector over the others. Capitalism emphasizes the importance of the economy whose legitimate function is to convert commodities into useful products. Capitalism assumes that the chance to make money will inspire workers to create a supply of products, and supply and demand will eventually become balanced. The dark side of capitalism is that it inspires greed, even by those who have the most money. When the economy is unchecked, it treats everything as commodities, including people, land, and capital (making money for the sake of more money). Modern capitalism arose at the end of the 19th century, but workers were treated poorly and already in the early 20th century they resented the power of the managers. This became fertile ground for the start of World War I.

To counteract capitalism, socialism arose which promised much better benefits for the workers. Its dark side was an emphasis on government which grew to overpower individual freedom.

Social threefolding aims to foster the best of both systems by setting appropriate boundaries on the economy and on government and strengthening the third, balancing element of culture with its emphasis on individual freedom.

Where did the idea of social threefolding come from?

“Liberté, Égalité, et Fraternité” was the rallying cry of the French Revolution. But the French did not realize that these ideals represented a new way of organizing society.

In 1917 Rudolf Steiner¹ introduced social threefolding in his book, *Towards Social Renewal*, in an attempt to shorten World War I and prevent future such catastrophes. (Social threefolding is often abbreviated as TSO, meaning Threefolding Social Organism, the more literal English translation of the original German words.) In 1919 several newspapers reported on the idea, but authorities resisted change and there was not enough time for it to take hold before a key vote in Upper Silesia, where it was considered. In the century since then, threefolding has received much study and elaboration, primarily by those who have studied Steiner's other works.

Although Steiner introduced social threefolding, he would have been quick to say that he did not invent the concept. He was however the first to recognize that the values of Freedom, Equality, and Brotherhood most properly belong to their respective spheres of culture, rights, and economics. One person's freedom should not infringe on others' human rights. Each person should have equal human rights but will not have equal thoughts or skills. Different skills are needed to make different products, but different skills should not affect equal rights to a decent human life. Steiner could see deeply into the human being and reported what was necessary for humans to continue to evolve in a healthy way.

Is there a spiritual basis behind social threefolding?

Yes. During Steiner's life and the century since then, many people have studied Steiner's ideas, most of which appeared in the 6,000 lectures he gave after age 40. Among these students of his ideas there is wide agreement that he was an initiate. But he did not want his ideas to simply be believed. Rather he hoped to be understood and for people to test his ideas for themselves, in freedom, to find their own truth.

Steiner asserted that human beings are primarily spiritual and are now ready to receive secrets that were once closely guarded in the mystery centers. We came from the spiritual world, incarnating into physical bodies, and we have gradually become more and more deeply incarnated and materialistic. The goal of this process, from a spiritual perspective, is to have us feel true freedom from the spiritual world and experience a self-consciousness that would otherwise be impossible. Other beings in the spiritual world do not have physical bodies and, to the extent that physical space applies to them, they interpenetrate each other. They are not separate and thus cannot experience true individuality.

Human beings have been given the gift of freedom. With this comes the freedom to act against each other or in support of each other. Also, freedom to grow or not, spiritually. The long-term goal is for human beings to permanently return to the spiritual world after many lifetimes on earth. But such human beings would be forever changed by their experiences on earth; they would have self-consciousness of their individual freedom. This would be unique in the spiritual

¹ Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) was able to see deeply into the human soul. He founded Waldorf education and made significant contributions to many other fields, including medicine, agriculture, architecture, music, speech, religion, and philosophy.

world. Steiner hinted at lofty goals for human beings beyond this eventuality but, due to our freedom, nothing is assured. Each person must choose their own unique path.

This goal of continual striving toward our higher spiritual nature is why we deeply need society to be structured in a way that supports our freedom and our willingness to support each other. The material world cannot support spiritual striving. If we choose to be carried by nature, without striving toward higher goals, we will be led further into materialism which, in the very long term, will disintegrate.

Already, some people have lost faith in human beings because of the evil that we are capable of. It is enticing to think that machines can do better. But machines do not have feelings, hearts, souls, or morals. Machines now threaten to take over our lives, especially the electronic versions which are highly addictive. Machines need to be limited to being mere tools, like spades or hammers, not alluring companions. And they should not replace the work of humans unless there are not enough humans who want to do that particular task.

The world had a chance to implement social threefolding after World War I. Steiner indicated that when a significant spiritual impulse does not take hold, humanity will be given other chances, about 33, 66, and, especially, 99-100 years later. But if the impulse does not take hold after a century, it will be a long time before humanity will be given another chance.

Our current society is under great tension. This, now, is our second chance. Our second opportunity to get this right.

The healthy social life is found
When, in the mirror of each individual soul,
The whole community finds its reflection
And when, in the community,
The strength of each one is living.²

How could changes in society be made, and how quickly?

Fundamental changes in society's structure will not come from those in power (with the possible exception of those who have unusual foresight) since they have no incentive to make changes. The demand for change must come from the 99%. Almost by definition, that kind of change must come slowly and organically. But it is important to take initial steps and make them visible in order to generate hope and inspiration for others who are watching the process.

² Rudolf Steiner, The Motto of the Social Ethic. To Edith Maryon, inscribed in a book on the Threefold Social Organism, November 1920.

Steiner recommended that approaching threefolding via justice (social justice) would be more effective than via any solutions based on economics.³

It is encouraging to note that successful and peaceful fundamental change has precedent. It is fully described in *Viking Economics* by the Quaker author, George Lakey, a social scientist who carefully studied the rise of Norway during the 20th century from a land of impoverished people and high inequality to what is now known as the Nordic model.

Early steps in Norway, just after its separation from Sweden, involved:

- the creation of study groups to understand the writings of socialist visionaries,
- many consumer co-ops banding together to form a much larger co-op to act as their wholesaler, and
- describing the plight of workers in many newspapers published by the Labor Party.

But Lakey made it clear that change involves hard work and the talents of many people.

How would threefolding change society?

In capitalist societies, the economy tends to dominate (see Addendum I illustration). In socialist societies, the state (political sphere) tends to dominate. With social threefolding (or TSO), the individual arises, consciously. In the 1970s women arose to claim more respect during the women's liberation movement. Just as women did not seek to dominate society, individuals in a movement toward TSO would not seek domination but rather equal status (see Addendum II illustration).

The economy, which now dominates nearly everything, needs the pressure of boundaries from the outside to reduce its size to a sustainable level. Steiner identified two boundaries: input and output. Regulations are needed to protect the environment, which is the source of all input of raw material; and to protect labor, which accomplishes the work needed to create the output of final products.

Both land and labor need the protections of equality from the political/rights sector so that the entire community benefits rather than a few individuals. Our society now has a number of regulations to protect the environment. But regulations about labor are largely left to employers.

One major way that equal status would be felt by labor is the way in which people are paid. Currently money, in the form of salaries, expresses the value that employers place on their workers' labor. Workers however feel that salaries are a judgment of their value as people, so salaries are rarely discussed, even among friends. Workers are treated as commodities because

³ Rudolf Steiner, *The Social Future*, Lecture 3 given October 26, 1919 in Zurich.

<https://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/GA332a/English/AP1945/19191026p01.html>

the function of any economy is to treat all input as commodities. But people abhor such treatment, often unconsciously. They do not want to be paid according to the value that management places on them. They want to be treated as having as equal a right to a decent life as anyone else.

This points strongly to the solution. To protect workers as people, the regulation of their labor should be handled outside the economic area in which the labor is performed. The kind of work people do, how they do it, and the amount of their work should be managed by the area that is tasked with upholding equal rights. Leisure should also be protected since it “awakens the mind to an appreciation of spiritual values.”⁴ Companies will adjust their amount of mechanization depending on the number of workers that they are allotted.

To describe a full implementation of social threefolding over time is beyond the scope of this introduction, but the following summary points to the major changes compared to current conditions. Further background is available on each point which would provide greater context and clarity.

- The economy would become a network of associations, wherein groups of people at each company who represent consumers, distributors, and the producer would determine product prices, quality, and volume. The variety of perspectives will foster cooperation and the determination of true prices.
- Money would be issued by an economic association rather than the political/rights sector.
- Money would be dated to discourage hoarding and to reflect the wearing out or consumption of goods and services that money is supposed to mirror.
- There would be no compound interest (which fosters the use of money as a commodity in itself).
- Capital would be administered in a way that allows gifted people to develop and use their abilities for the benefit of society. When capital accumulates, it should either be used by the same person for the same business, or, if the community no longer benefits, the capital should be transferred to another person whose abilities benefit the community.
- Land would not be purchased or rented. People would instead have the right to live in a particular place, managed by the political/rights sector.
- Buildings would be paid for once: only while being built.
- All members of society would continue to benefit from the freedom and creativity of the cultural sphere. In particular, corporations which create goods and services will continue to receive the gift of trained workers and creative ideas from schools and research institutions. In return, corporate associations will choose which aspects of the cultural sector to support with freely-given gifts of money.
 - Schools, as critical components of any society, would probably be supported, at least in part, by compulsory gifts.

⁴ Steiner, *TSO*, p. 34.

- All areas in the cultural sector would be motivated toward excellence by competing with each other to be worthy of freely-given gifts.
- If corporate gifts are not great enough to support the cultural sector adequately, the corporate association would recognize this and adjust product prices accordingly.
- Salaries would be based on individual needs rather than talents. Parents of young children would receive more than single people who have no dependents. Salaries may be regulated by the political/rights sector. The source of salaries would be:
 - in the political/rights sector, from taxes.
 - in the economic sector, from the sale of goods.
 - in the cultural sector, from gifts, especially from the economic sector.
- The judicial system would become part of the cultural/spiritual sector, which focuses on freedom of the individual. Steiner suggested the possibility of having judges serve for a limited time, and each person would pre-select their own judge whose verdict they would be willing to accept if a case were brought against them. Complainants would then have to use the judge of the defendant. The political/rights sector however would carry out the sentence.
- Schools would be self-governing to allow full freedom of thought.

If people are paid according to their needs rather than their work, what will keep them working?

A society founded on social threefolding will give a great deal to each person in order to foster their uniqueness. Everyone will have the right to a home, will be given a free education, and will receive enough money to be able to lead a decent life. Some may wonder if this would lead to laziness since people are given so much. It is worth noting that most people now have little or no experience with this kind of freedom, so deeper thought is necessary to accurately anticipate responses to this restructuring of society.

Steiner recognized that human beings have a fundamental tendency toward egoism, or thinking primarily of oneself and one's family. Because the tendency to egoism is so strong, most people assume that society should be structured to allow people to keep the fruits of their labor for themselves. Steiner pointed out however that any society founded on egoism will, sooner or later, result in suffering and poverty.

He gave the example of Robert Owen's failed experiment with a model community in the 1800s.⁵ Owen believed deeply in the inherent goodness of people, but he learned that to counteract egoism, people must not merely recognize that certain institutions will benefit the community. They must also feel warmly attached to the community and feel inclined to support it. This means that any successful community must have a spiritual mission, and every person in the community must want to fulfill that mission. A spirit of the community must be alive and active in every member. Only people who labor entirely for their fellows can become, little by little, workers without egoism.

⁵ Rudolf Steiner, *ASO*, paragraph 16ff.

Steiner described a fundamental social law that is as valid as any law of physics or mathematics:

In a community of human beings working together, the well-being of the community will be the greater, the less individuals claim for themselves the proceeds of the work they themselves have done, i.e., the more of these proceeds they give over to their fellow-workers, and the more their own requirements are satisfied, not by the results of their own work, but by work done by others.⁶

Steiner predicted that when the spiritual life is free, when people truly work according to their passions, both the state and the economy will receive all that they need and more than they receive now. The more that brotherhood is cultivated, the more fruitful economic life becomes.

Where is social threefolding already happening?

A forerunner example is the Nordic model. Norway's progress was based on its socialist government placing workers' rights as its top priority, and in turn the government earned the trust of its people. The system has "abundant built-in mechanisms to force transparency and accountability."⁷ Steiner's concern about socialism as a vision however is that the more state control there is, the less likely that individual ability will find its place.

It is worth noting the following quote from Lakey: "Of course, equality and freedom are not the only values that the Nordics hold dear. The descendants of the Vikings do care about community, solidarity, and nature for their own sake."⁸ It is not surprising that these values can be summarized as equality, freedom, and brotherhood with a deep respect for nature.

Martin Large, British author of *Common Wealth: For a free, equal, mutual and sustainable society*, indicates that Burlington, Vermont, is the best example of social threefolding in the United States. Other examples of early-stage TSO include community-supported agriculture, community land trusts, BerkShares (a complementary currency), B-corporations (now possible in 30 states and 42 countries), socially responsible investing, and the fair trade movement.

Nicanor Perlas indicates that the largest effort in conscious threefolding is taking place in Bayawan City (population 120,000) in the Philippines and that the Philippine Development Plan (2017–2022) explicitly mentions threefolding and sustainable integrated area development (SIAD).⁹

In Egypt, the SEKEM Initiative was founded in 1977 with a vision strongly influenced by Steiner's threefolding ideas. SEKEM received the 2003 Right Livelihood Award ("Alternative Nobel Prize") as a "business model for the 21st century." The Heliopolis University for Sustainable Development was opened in 2012 under the SEKEM umbrella, which also includes schools, a medical center,

⁶ Quoted in Lamb and Hearn, p.24.

⁷ Lakey, p. 234.

⁸ Ibid., p. 219.

⁹ Large & Briault, pp. 7–8.

textiles, phyto-pharmaceuticals, and its original vision of producing, processing, and marketing organic and biodynamic foods.¹⁰

Since TSO is so broad in scope, how can early steps be sure to lead in the right direction?

The spiritual nature of threefolding underscores the importance of the intentions behind early steps. Founding intentions, including unconscious ones, tend to penetrate deeply into the future of whatever is being created.

The surest approach is to have social threefolding evolve from its three basic values. As you or your group proceed, institute regular practices to check the following (you may wish to formulate other or additional questions¹¹):

- Freedom of thought

Am I or are we staying as conscious as possible about our intentions and assumptions?

Am I following my heart, my passion?

- Equality

Am I or are we being selfless enough to allow others to shine? As a community becomes stronger, the community will appreciate what has been done more than who did the work.

- Brotherhood

Do I or do we feel gratitude strongly enough for what has prepared me or us so that it spills into our next actions?

Am I able to feel compassion for those with whom I disagree or those I dislike?

Do we encourage each other's efforts?

From a purely selfish viewpoint, the stronger you make the community, the more strongly you will be supported and be able to follow your heart.

How are Quakers already aligned with TSO, and how can they in particular be helpful with next steps?

When one Friend recently summarized the long-term goals of Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL), the summary could easily be further summarized as Freedom, Equality, and Brotherhood with a deep respect for the land.

There are two major ways in which Quakers would be helpful in a movement toward TSO:

- Quakers have long experience with not only activism, but peaceful activism. They understand what actions are likely to be most effective.
- Quakers call each other Friends for good reason. They are deeply committed to finding unity when people disagree. As the economy transforms to become an associative economy, the Quaker approach to finding unity among people with very different opinions could be vital.

¹⁰ Ibid., chapter 10.

¹¹ Queries such as these are a common Quaker practice of maintaining consciousness over time around core values.

In addition, Quakers are highly respected by the general public because of their commitments to peace and integrity. If Quakers are behind a cause, other people will take note and listen.

What can I do now, as an individual?

Social threefolding is a huge topic and can feel overwhelming. If it resonates with you, the best step is to determine the aspect that resonates with you the most. That will determine where your energy is.

Suggestions include:

- Create a study group to research the aspects of social threefolding that are of most interest. More information is at www.3fsotoday.org; www.threefolddirectory.com or see the list of resources in *Steinerian Economics* by Lamb and Hearn (see Resources, below).
- Advocate for a financial transaction tax to replace the income tax. More information is at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Financial_transaction_tax#Types_of_financial_transaction_taxes. Also see the position paper, "A New Tri-Sectoral Imagination of the American Future" by Chris Schaefer et al, at www.3fsotoday.org.
- Advocate for free housing. Money serves us best when it moves quickly, reflecting that goods and services are moving easily. But currently a huge amount of money is locked up in land and buildings. If a community-owned corporation owns all rights to local real estate, the community would freely give an occupant the right to live in a building as long as the occupant maintains the building. Human beings have the right to housing as part of their right to lead a decent human life. This right should not be purchased. More information is in Chapter 10 of *Common Wealth* by Martin Large (see Resources, below).
- Advocate for a living wage for all, regardless of their labor. A living wage should depend on a person's actual needs, not on their mere existence. Centro de Estudios Espinosa Yglesias (CEEY) in Mexico is assembling researchers from several countries this year who are interested in creating and implementing local Minimum Income Standards based on group wisdom gathered from low-income residents. More information at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8hC17MbLIXY>.
- Advocate for free education wherein fully qualified teachers are trusted to do their jobs well, free of outside standards. More information is in the section on Waldorf Education in *Steinerian Economics* by Lamb and Hearn (see Resources, below). Also see Chapter 11 of *Common Wealth* by Martin Large (see Resources, below).
- Advocate for money that depreciates, properly reflecting goods and services whose value depreciates over time. More information is at <https://new-economics-journal.org/18011-en/>.

Concluding thoughts

With social threefolding offering so many benefits, it might be easy to think that a TSO society would be a utopia. It would not be. In an idealized utopia, everyone agrees with each other. TSO would instead be a framework which encourages everyone to become a unique individual. This inherently means that there will be different opinions.

With a structure that encourages uniqueness, we will come to learn that it is exactly the differences between us which inspire us to become better human beings. As we grow, our differences will gradually become less divisive as we strive to be closer to the one Truth that allows for many perspectives. If everyone believes in the spiritual mission of the community, we will want to support it and will work cooperatively toward the next steps that bring the most benefit to all.

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Resources

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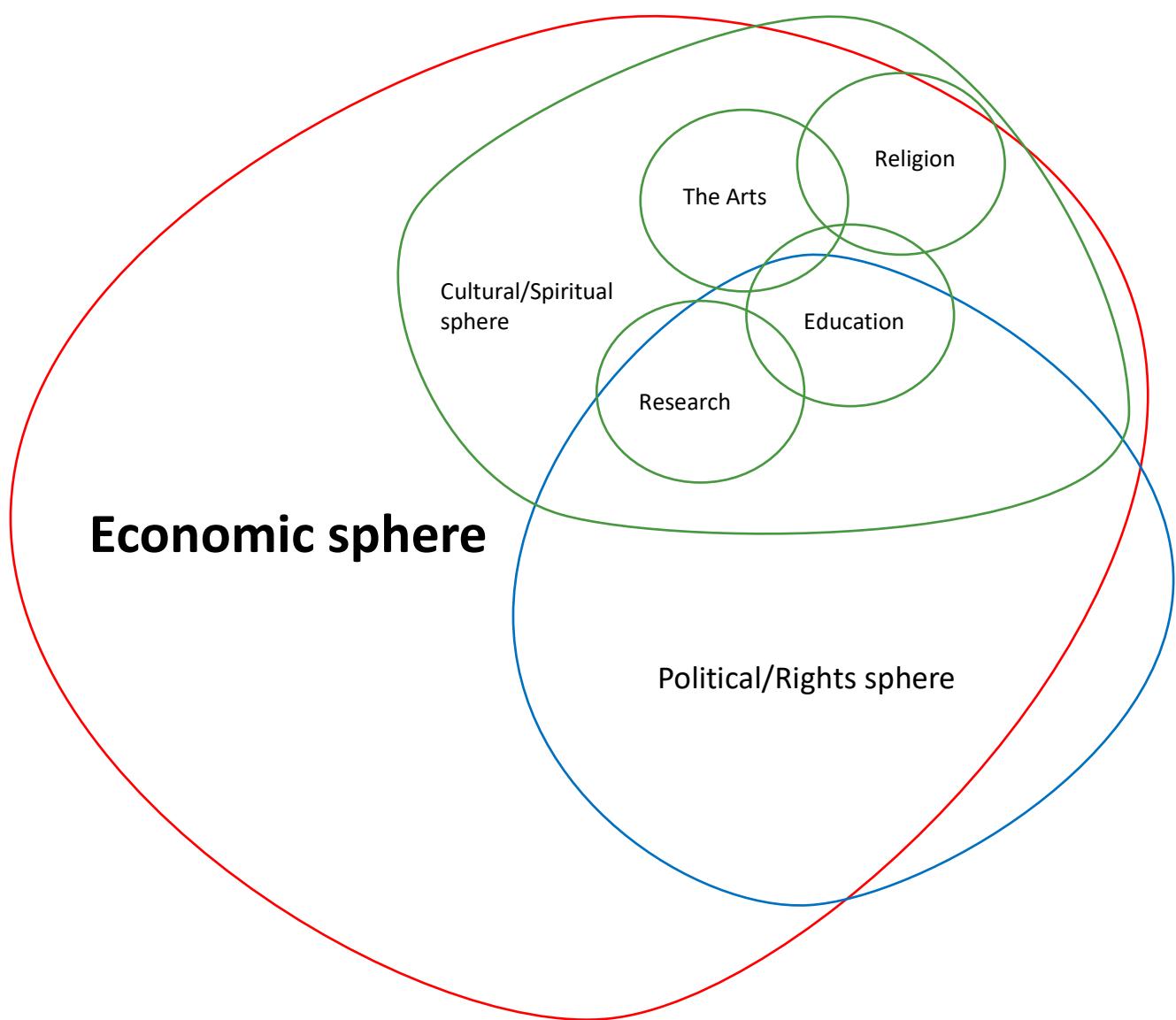
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Online:

www.3FSOToday.org
www.threefolddirectory.com

Current society is unbalanced.



Future society is balanced.

