

This War is Not Inevitable

**The background to a new play written by Michael Hedley Burton
about the birth of the idea of the Threefold Social Organism in 1917
– soon to tour Canada and USA in early 2018**

1917 is the centenary year of a number of important events – the entry of America into the First World War, the Russian Revolution, and something that at the time didn't get as much notice as either of these but may one day be credited as having equally great significance – the birth in Central Europe of the idea of the Threefold Social Organism.

The Threefold Social Organism (more commonly called the Threefold Social *Order* or Social Threefolding) is an idea, first conceived by Rudolf Steiner in Berlin during the summer of 1917, for how society can work in a way that avoids the usual difficulties that are associated with the government of nations. It is an idea that demands we think about many things in ways different from how we are accustomed to think of them.

Most people take it for granted that life today will be dominated either by economic powers or by the state or by some kind of collusion between the two. You can look at China and say that in that country the state controls the economy; you can look at America and say that their corporations and the whole financial system have a great deal of influence over the state. Improvers of society generally focus on the state to bring better laws and fiscal policies; some states may be more citizen-friendly than others, but when the state is seen as the body that will fix things, the fundamental dualism of state and corporation is firmly in place; most people have become accustomed to this.

Rudolf Steiner saw that it was necessary to transcend this dualism if humanity was going to fulfil its evolutionary potential. He saw that neither of these powers could achieve anything of real value without there being something else present in society. Social Threefolding factors in a third power - the free spiritual and cultural life of the citizens. When the free initiative of individuals is valued and fostered and allowed to work into the fabric of society, a vibrant spiritual and intellectual life will arise with a certain power within it that allows it to act as a wedge between the other two powers. In Social Threefolding a healthy equilibrium of forces is achieved; at its centre there is a sphere devoted to safeguarding the human rights of every individual citizen.

In the months leading up to January 2017 I had been reading a lot about the Threefold Social Organism. I felt within me a kind of enthusiasm for something that was so simple in its essence, so common-sensical, but side by side with this I felt the despair and inertia that is so common everywhere when individuals consider what they can do to make the world a better place. The present system is so overwhelmingly powerful – how can room be created for something most people have never even heard of? In the present system, people fight passionately over the differences between Left and Right without realising that in doing this they remain firmly within the matrix of the status quo. Social threefolding is neither Left nor Right – it takes the best of each and lifts this into something higher.

As I read websites devoted to Social Threefolding, I sensed an inability from many writers to make ideas feel real and achievable to ordinary people. Very knowledgeable people debated the details of what Steiner meant as if there was one fixed recipe. But Steiner himself spoke of the need to structure society differently at every moment. The starting point for each individual is to bring their inner life into a certain degree of creativity so that ideas can be effective in the world. Steiner knew that anti-social forces would grow far more powerful as time went on and that therefore people must connect to new spiritual streams of inspiration and thereby find the strength to meet these forces. The TSO would have effects in the outer world but its existence must first start within oneself.

Learning to perceive life in three different ways, which is what the TSO asks of us, is a faculty that can be learned and practised. What could be done to show people today that the TSO is a viable alternative within the scope of any person of good will?

The idea came to write a play. Plays are not seen by vast numbers of people – they tend to go under the radar of general awareness, but they can be powerful. Put 100 people in a room and expose them together to something of power and artistry that moves them in places that usually are not addressed and this will ripple out and have an effect in the world.

A few days after New Year's Day 2017 I began my writing. It seemed to me that the best way of showing people the basic ideas of the TSO was to go back to the situation that existed 100 years ago before it had yet appeared. The play took shape through the interactions of Steiner and his friends and opponents as he grappled with the very first unveiling of his ideas into a world at war. One character, Otto, working in the Bavarian Embassy (loosely based on an actual person but changed and made young in order to give better expression to the youthfulness of the ideas) comes to Rudolf Steiner out of a certain despair at what he sees everywhere around him. What Otto hears from Steiner touches his feelings and his will. He subjects himself to a crash course in social transformation. Together with Steiner he goes out into the world of the rulers of society of that time and does what he can to change the world. Much of what they tried to do together is not successful, but only through such energetic activity could the first seeds of social transformation be planted.

I did not refer directly to Steiner's elaboration of the TSO as I wrote but tried to pull things out of my own experiences. When I sent the first draft to a recognized expert in the field his first reply was to ask me what gave me the right to write a play about the Threefold Social Organism when I obviously knew so little about it! I took this in a good spirit, admitting my ignorance and saying that I had sent it to him so that he would help me fix the inaccuracies; a second draft was soon crafted and met with his approval.

Financially I had problems in producing this. My wife and I had just bought a flat and gone over budget. I was broke. The play was for two people, but where could I find a second actor who could live with the insecurity that I was asking of him? I had met Ryan Kouroukis a couple of years earlier. I wrote to him and described my vision. He said he would come to New Zealand, where I was living, to work with me, and I bought his ticket on my credit card. Suddenly the two of us had made a commitment to get this darn show on the road! I began writing to individuals and businesses and was generously supported with grants from Prometheus Finance and

sponsorship from Ceres Enterprises (both New Zealand based) and, most significantly, with donations from individuals. With my wife Kathy and with the help of two wonderful American troubadours, William and Alexandra Riggins who were at that time passing through Auckland, I put together in very quick time a rather amateurish video for a crowd-funding appeal which went out mainly to my friends in New Zealand and Australia. Some people condemned it, but it did the business. We got the money we needed for Ryan and myself to have seven weeks of rehearsals together and to cover all the international travel between New Zealand and Europe. Effectively Australians and New Zealanders sponsored the later trip to Europe.

Many are the stories that could be told about our touring! We have now done 35 performances in New Zealand, Australia, the UK, Ireland and Germany. More than 2,000 people have seen the show and engaged in some way with the idea of the Threefold Social Organism. There were high points and low points. One low point was to be told by the principal of a Steiner School that the play would be better if I left out in my marketing all mention of Steiner because parents at his school would be turned off by that! Another low point was to do the show at a conference of Steiner teachers where 170 teachers were present during the day but only 35 turned out to see our evening performance.

We wanted very much to reach out to people who knew nothing of Rudolf Steiner, but our circumstances necessitated starting with the people who knew something of Steiner already. If locals had initiative they could invite others from groups that shared such ideas. Ryan and I were forced by necessity to do almost all the administration – difficult when you are also trying to learn some quite complicated lines! After every performance we had a discussion with the audience. Sometimes only a few stayed and sometimes a large percentage, but it felt important always to discuss, in the different parts of the world that we were visiting, the relevance today of the situation that had been shown historically in the play. The general consensus, expressed in very different ways, was that we are living in a time very similar to that which Germany was going through in 1917 and that something like the TSO is desperately needed today to bring out the potential that we know humanity carries within it.

The final part of the play shows how in April 1919 Molt asks Steiner to assist him in opening a school for the children of the employees of his Stuttgart cigarette factory and how Steiner is overjoyed at this request. In our shortened high school performances at the various Steiner/Waldorf schools in which we performed we showed all of this part of the play. It was especially gratifying to observe how students in three different countries responded incredibly well to seeing this dramatized. They could take a new pride in their school, seeing it as something that had been born as a gesture of hope out of the ruins of the First World War.

Students also engaged strongly with the theme in discussions. In Germany we performed in three educational institutions, and the high quality discussions there were a highlight for me. Young people are the ones who have to live in this world when we older ones are gone – it is so good to see them taking hold of such a topic and showing such matter-of-fact realism about what is wrong with society and what they can practically achieve through their lives. It was especially moving to do the play at the teacher-training seminar in Stuttgart, just a few hundred yards from where the events of the last part of our drama had once taken place.

Now the exciting task is before me of taking this play to North America. When I first wrote it, it always seemed to me that this was where it would be going and that everything that came before was rehearsal for that. Ryan always said he would return to England in October, but I have made a connection with another young actor. This is Christian Peterson, a recent graduate of the British American Drama Academy and a former pupil of the Hawthorne Valley Waldorf School, at Ghent, New York State, USA.

We are putting shape to our tour now, writing to high schools and communities. (There is a 50-minute performance for high school students as well as the 90- minute regular show.) If anyone reading this in the USA or Canada is interested in hosting a performance, please do get in touch with me. Any donations to help us cover our costs would also be appreciated.

Nicanor Perlas, a champion of TSO from the Philippines, calls this the “Ready, fire, aim!” way of doing things. Events push us to places we might not go to if we worked out of the intellect alone. Even adversarial forces – and for some reason there have been many of these, more than I have ever met before – can be turned into a source of inspiration and strength when you are doing something you know is important for the future.

We hope that we will be able to connect with many of you who read this article.

Michael Hedley Burton

This War is Not Inevitable, directed by Rod Green, with actors Michael Burton and Christian Peterson, will open its North American tour at the Kolisko Conference in Honolulu, Hawaii, on February 19th 2018 and go on to various places in North America after that.

If you would like to host a performance in your community contact

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See our video on you-tube at <https://youtu.be/MsKb4jAS44I>.