

## REZENSIONEN / BOOK REVIEWS

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Johannes Rohen. *Functional Threefoldness in the Human Organism and Human Society*. Hillsdale, NY: Adonis Press, 2011.

In the chaos following the First World War, Rudolf Steiner first communicated his ideas for a social order based on the recognition of culture, politics and economics as three distinct realms of social life, each with its own special functions and operating principles. He described these functions as mirroring those of the human organism, the analogy of the nervous, respiratory-circulatory and metabolic systems perfectly capturing the qualities of separateness yet interdependence which characterise the relationship between the spheres of human society. In the human body, the different biological processes have clear locations or centres, yet each permeates the whole to form a unity. If one breaks down, or an imbalance is created by one dominating over the others, the resulting illness spreads through the whole organism. Similarly, in human society, if attention is concentrated almost exclusively on one sphere, or if one functional principle is made the basis for all social interaction, forces which ought to be nurturing and regenerative become the exact opposite.

Anatomist Johannes Rohen delves further into the details of this analogy, seeking to map out “sound functional principles such as are found in the healthy human organism” and “look at how they might function in a social context without giving rise to pathologies”. Like Steiner, Rohen’s premise is that grasping these functional principles will enable individuals to act with greater consciousness, consistency and feeling, and in this way strive to “bring more humanity into human society”. As proof of an existing pathology, Rohen points to familiar and ongoing symptoms, among them the widespread

faith in unlimited economic growth as a fix-all social policy, uncontrolled and aggressive expansion of multi-national corporations in spite of untold environmental and human costs, an interpretation of private ownership which takes no account of cooperative effort, over-reliance on government, and the diminishing freedom and independence of scientific and educational institutions.

### From threefold to ninefold structures

His, however, is not a book about these problems *per se*, but rather it is a book about concepts which he believes can help us understand social phenomena more clearly. Rohen is keen to emphasise that the value of a comparison between the human and social organism lies not in any equivalence of states but an equivalence of processes. The three fundamental processes in the human body are *information exchange*, carried out by the central nervous system and sense organs, *substance exchange*, carried out by the metabolic system including the organs of movement, and (rhythmic) *transport and distribution*, carried out by the circulatory-respiratory system. The nervous system is centred in the brain or ‘upper’ region of the body while the metabolic system is centred in the abdomen and limbs or ‘lower’ region of the body. These two form a polarity, performing mutually exclusive functions which are however brought into cooperative proximity by the activity of the circulatory-respiratory system operating in the ‘middle’ region of the human body.

This same threefold structure can also be perceived in society. The cultural (also referred to as the spiritual or intellectual) sphere includes education, science, research, art and religion; the political (also referred to as the legal or rights) sphere is concerned with order, security and rights relationships between people; and the economy is concerned strictly with production, distribution and consumption. While it is not uncommon today for these realms to be distinguished between, Rohen re-iterates Steiner’s central claim that for society to be healthy the three realms must be allowed to operate with a high degree

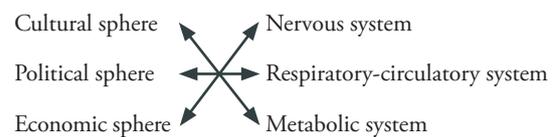
of autonomy and must be guided by principles which are inherently suited to their particular task within the social order. The concepts of liberty, equality and brotherhood, emerging in the context of the French Revolution, are presented as a clear yet still widely misunderstood articulation of this social reality. The mistake has been to assume that these principles can be realised in one unified social structure rather than three integrated ones. “Unity”, in Steiner’s words, “must derive as a *result* of different activities streaming from different directions” (Steiner, 1977, p.110).

The cultural realm is characterised by difference, i.e. difference in talents, interests, ideas, traditions, religious orientation and so on. If difference is to flourish and stimulate a vibrant, fulfilling spiritual and intellectual life, the guiding impulse for relations in this realm must be *freedom* for the individual. The political/legal realm, in contrast, is characterised by commonality. There are certain matters which all adult members of a society have a right and capacity to decide upon by virtue of our common human experience, and in which all are judged in kind. The primary concept here, therefore, is *equality*. Finally, the economic realm is characterised by mutuality. Individuals meet each other’s material needs through cooperation and consensus, as is evidenced by ever greater division of labour and collaboration across industries and nations. It is not competition, therefore, but *brotherhood* which constitutes the defining feature of all modern economic dealings.

In using the three anatomical functions to illuminate social processes and dynamics, Rohen does not ‘match up’ the spheres in the way one might initially expect. It is not the nervous and sensory system, centralised in the head/brain of the human body, which is equated with the cultural/intellectual realm of society, but rather the metabolic system. The ‘upper’ part of the social organism, in other words, is compared to the ‘lower’ part of the human organism. Since it is human thinking and ingenuity which lead to technical and labour innovations and thus economic regeneration, cultural life can be understood as that which ‘feeds’ the economy, in the same way that it is the metabolic system which provides the materials for regeneration in the body.

The nervous and sensory system, on the other hand, is equated with the processes of economic life (i.e. the ‘upper’ of the human is connected to the ‘lower’ of the social organism). The cultural and economic spheres in the social organism form

polar opposites in the same way the nervous and metabolic systems do in the human. As said, these poles interact by means of the mediating function of the circulatory-respiratory processes. In society, it is legal/political institutions which, operating in the ‘middle’ as it were, create the framework for these functions and thus preserve the “integrity and functionality of the whole”.



Rohen does not leave things at this stage, but sets out to go beyond “general comparisons” by exploring “each of these functions as differentiated entities”. It is here where things become more complicated. What he reports to have discovered is that each of the three functions, both human and social, are themselves threefold in structure and can be further divided and analogised. Not only does each function have its own ‘upper’, ‘middle’ and ‘lower’ activities, but each of these equally have their corresponding functional principle. That is to say, while the predominant principle in the cultural sphere and metabolic system may be freedom, both also entail processes which are characterised by relationships of equality and cooperation. As such, “the full picture entails a ninefold structure”, or rather, two parallel ninefold structures. Only by means of this ninefold picture, he suggests, can one arrive at a “factually convincing comparison between the human and social functional processes.”

## Nervous system and economy

In Rohen’s analogy the human nervous system is compared to the economic sphere in order to illustrate the key process of *information exchange* that occurs in both. The nervous system has an ‘upper’ region, formed by the central nervous system and sense organs concentrated in the brain. This region regulates the human being’s relationship to her environment, from the simple reflex to complex actions or “reflections”. The economy likewise has three sectors: consumption, production and trade. The processes of the central nervous system are most functionally similar to the consumption (‘upper’) sector of the economic realm. It is only in this sector, according to Rohen, that *freedom* is of paramount importance. Individuals find themselves in vastly

different circumstances, have different interests, sensibilities and taste, and in choosing the products and services best suited to them they must be entirely free from coercion.

The brain and senses are organs of perception: through them the individual apprehends the external world, processes impressions, comprehends needs, formulates intentions and interacts consciously with other human beings. "It is by virtue of the central nervous system that we can 'consume' life as we please". A healthy economic system is one which represents a true picture of reality and responds to the needs and wishes of individuals. Where efforts are focused on creating or manipulating needs (to maximise profit) rather than reacting to them, through advertising and other marketing schemes, the economy represents a false picture of reality. Just as illness is caused in the body when the senses fail to convey accurate information to the brain, so the failure of the economic system to reflect factual reality leads to "aberrant behaviour" in social life.

The 'lower' region of the nervous system is the automatic nervous system, an expansive network formed in the cavities and organs of the rest of body, facilitating communication between organs. This system is equated with the production sector of economy. "The decisive factor here is the information exchange by which metabolic processes are co-ordinated and harmonized." Cooperation is the dominant function, as in economic production. Although the main aim of the economy is to produce and circulate goods, it is nevertheless dominated by structures that allow for the efficient exchange of information. Consider the intricate web of precisely timed and coordinated activities involved in the process of mass producing and distributing a car. Rather than stressing material processes, Rohen points to the "highly differentiated and mutually dependent" information-driven structures which are and can only be sustained by close cooperation.

Similarly, the automatic nervous system does not produce substances, but coordinates the organs that do. If one set of organs requires more metabolic substances, through increased physical activity, for instance, the supply to other organs is reduced, ensuring a harmonious interplay which in turn prevents illness. In economic life, if the operations of productive 'organs' are allowed to become one-sided, through a misguided commitment to the principle of freedom perhaps, the necessary balance of give

and take is upset resulting, again, in pathology from the perspective of the whole social organism.

Finally, the 'middle' region of the nervous system, the spinal cord and spinal nerves, is related to the market sector of the economy. "Just as in the human organism an act of movement is made possible by the harmonious integration of sensory and motor nerves into reflex systems, so in the economy production and consumption must be precisely attuned to each other and thus held in balance." At market, consumer and producer meet to exchange at a fair price, and for justice to prevail in all transactions, there must be *equality* between trading partners. In the 'market and distribution' system of the body, the circulatory and respiratory systems connect the head to abdominal organs, regulating the flow of energy and substances throughout the organism. In the 'middle' region of the nervous system the "closely connected afferent [sensory] and efferent [motor] neural pathways must be of equal value if, in conjunction with the metabolic system, they are to maintain functional harmony".

Life processes are thus dominated by "precise, automatic cooperation" facilitated by the motor and sensory nerves being "always functionally equal". Rohen suggests that the central connecting and regulatory function, performed in the human body by the spinal cord and brain, could be carried out in the social body by "associations" or "economic councils" along the lines of Steiner's proposals. Steiner argued that sound judgement in the economic realm is dependent on the shared perspective and consensual (contractual) cooperation of all three branches of economic activity. Councils, made up of producer, consumer and trade representatives, could be responsible for monitoring economic trends, allocating resources and harmonising consumption and production. In this way "not laws, but men" would regulate the economy "using their immediate insight and interests" (Steiner, 1972, p.17).

For this process of determining reciprocal outputs, *price* is the most crucial factor. In Steiner's terms a "true" price emerges only when both parties consider an exchange to be advantageous, that is to say, when values are commensurate. Price is thus the "barometer" which makes visible what is required in economic life as a whole. Rather than being left to the vagaries of supply and demand, prices can be regulated intelligently by individuals observing what is happening on a day-to-day basis. Price regulation

is here not intended to mean the legal requirement for consumers to spend more or less on a particular commodity, but rather the re-deployment of resources and manpower. Continuing with the measurement analogy, Steiner suggested that attempting to alter economic circumstances by tinkering with price-tags applies the same logic as one would in trying to change the temperature in a room by fiddling with the thermometer instead of tending to the fire; it changes nothing in real terms, leading to a distortion of reality and thus the “aberrant behaviour” Rohen refers to (Steiner, 1972, pp.71-96).

Steiner’s description of economic councils, which work associatively rather than competitively to ensure that prices accurately reflect economic values, clearly resonates with Rohen’s linking of the economy to the perception and consciousness organs of the human being. In making economic realities transparent to all, the responsibility for one another that is a simple fact of modern economic life also becomes transparent. No individual can act economically without having an impact on someone else, and the notion that exploitation is the preserve of the rich is exposed as nothing but a comforting illusion. Economic communities are in this way comparable not only to the consciousness but the conscience of society: “Whether I be poor or rich, I am equally an exploiter when I purchase things which are underpaid” (Steiner, 1982, p.2).

### **Money as life-blood**

In Rohen’s analogy, the branches of government serve important mediating and regulating functions. Laws set the parameters for the activities of all spheres, as well as harmonising relations between them. “The most essential source of order and vitality in society”, however, is money, which “plays a role performed by the blood in the human organism”. Rohen argues that monetary affairs can become much more transparent if it is perceived that money has three distinct qualities, or perhaps better said, the nature of money changes according to the social context in which it is being used. Steiner termed these different types of money ‘purchase’ money, i.e. money which serves as a means of exchange in the market and derives its value from commodities produced by the economy; ‘loan’ money, which stimulates practical realisation of the insights of the cultural realm through investment and capitalisation; and ‘gift’ money, which is ‘used up’ in the funding of cultural

and other activities (e.g. education and training, care for the young, healthcare, etc.) which bring about no immediate or direct material productivity. The latter form of “unconditional advance”, of course, although de-valuing money (bringing about its ‘death’) sows the seeds for all that will sustain and re-vitalise social life in the future.

The key observation emphasised by Rohen is that money must be allowed to depreciate, that is to say, depreciation ought to be consciously built into the system to ensure that commodities and money are always balanced in value. As values are created through production, so must they be expended either when capital is re-invested in the production process (in machinery, for instance, that will produce new products enabling “naked” money to be “re-clothed” with commodity value, to use yet another metaphor), or through consumption. Just as human blood cells have a fixed lifespan and are being continually reproduced by bone marrow, money should be kept constant by this continual cycle of ‘birth’, ‘growing old’, ‘death’ and ‘rebirth’: “Its level should be determined according to the economic value creation of a particular economic region, i.e. the “fundamental store of value”, which depends on the work done, the population size and the country’s natural resources”. If money circulation mirrors the economic value of the actual goods in circulation, then money has no independent value or existence, it merely “represents the book-keeping for the productivity and income of the people using a particular currency.”

Clearly, this image is set in contrast to current practices in modern capitalist society where money has acquired value independent of commodities and thus can be traded as a commodity in its own right. Although commodities or hardware wear out, the money which once represented them not only continues to exist, but self-propagates, in the form of interest, dividends, derivatives, etc. The billions resulting from financial speculation have “no true functional relationship to economic production”. Rather than being used up through spending in the cultural sphere and on other social goods (completing the cycle), the vast sums generated on the stock market are re-invested, leading to relentless economic expansion and an unprecedented concentration of economic power, not to mention uncontrollable inflationary tendencies. Where capital resources are focused to such a great extent on improving productive infrastructures and almost

all human creative capacities are harnessed into this process, the result is a massive overdevelopment of the productive sector. Again, the analogy with the human circulatory system is invoked. In the body any overproduction of cells causes a tumour, and as more and more blood vessels are required to feed this abnormal growth, life forces are diverted from other organs and the tumour has the capacity to destroy the entire organism.

The threefold picture thus also comes into play in the description of money circulation and Rohen uses the functional principles to indicate misuses of money in the various spheres of society. Freedom is curtailed, for instance, in the cultural sphere when knowledge and information is hoarded by R&R departments of large corporations or military agencies and a large proportion of a nation's academics and scientists are pressed into the service of these secretive institutions. The abundance of information products, including promotional literature and advertising, magazines, catalogues as well as manifold forms of "mindless entertainment" are also given as evidence that money is disappearing "into a morass of senseless and superfluous production and consumption imperatives", leaving nothing for real needs.

### Feeding the machine

In the productive sphere, adhering to the principle of competition rather than going with the logic of cooperation means that those who control capital have a great deal of power not only in the use of machines but over other human beings. Economic "slavery" will exist for as long as work continues to be quantified in terms of money (i.e. is tied to wages) and for as long as so many people collaborating in productive enterprises are denied, due to the near sacrosanct principle of private ownership, the right to reap the rewards of their collective effort.

In fact, Rohen points out, it is not human beings at all who are reaping the rewards of the immense wealth modern capitalist societies are blessed with. Eerily, it is *machines* which are "gobbling up" the surplus acquired through human creative energies, machines which are in a sense "earning" all that money. Across all branches of industry there is greater and greater incentive for businesses to install ever more sophisticated and costly machines. These investments are justified in terms of increasing profitability and market competitiveness, yet the

costlier the machines the more profits they absorb. The growing efficiency of machines, moreover, means that they require a greater and greater volume of work to be profitable, and as such the sector is compelled to be perpetually increasing production to meet this demand. The market is flooded with goods, many of which are not wanted or needed, or there would be neither need for such immense spending on advertising nor such waste. The most tragic absurdity is that where there is genuine demand there is often no effective demand, as more and more people, having been replaced by machines to save on wage costs, find themselves with no income. "A horrific vision of the end of this process would be a fully automated, robot-driven economy, in which human beings would be nothing more than unemployed spectators. Lacking the means to buy anything, they would be living in spiritual and material poverty in the midst of gross overproduction".

Rohen thus paints a vivid and frightening picture of a society whose members are devoting all their energy and creative capacities to sustaining a system which is leading inexorably to the total eradication of those very capacities. The only way to prevent this spiralling descent into spiritual and material poverty is to break free from the monetary paradigm in which we have become locked. He presents the functional principles, rightly applied and in the appropriate context, as a means to this end. Although not a large book, it is densely packed with images and interesting ideas which are certainly worth exploring. The core social principles that Rohen aims to communicate, however, are in places overshadowed by the detail and complexity of the analogy with the human functional processes. One wonders if it is possible or even desirable to fit everything neatly into the ninefold structure, and at times the effort to make parallels feels a little forced. Beyond that, and in spite of the author's clear acknowledgement of a hard road ahead, the notion that the threefolding/functional approach can solve all our problems and bring about "an era of social progress" can be slightly off-putting in its seeming comprehensiveness. Nevertheless, this book brings into stark focus many "rational irrationalities" permeating contemporary industrial societies and offers a set of conceptual tools for re-perceiving, and thus potentially re-shaping, the social world.

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