

Preface to the Fourth German Edition (1920)

People who apply Utopian ideas to contemporary society fail to understand the challenges it poses. Starting from particular views, experiences and feelings, it is easy to believe that this or that social form must inevitably bring about human happiness; and such belief can come to seem overwhelmingly persuasive. But in trying to impose such a belief, one can completely fail to address the nub of the 'social problem'.

It may seem extreme and nonsensical to say so, but it is nevertheless true that even if someone possessed a perfect *theoretical* solution to social questions it would be wholly impractical to believe that he could cure the ills of humanity simply by making this available. It is no longer either right or feasible in our age to believe that we can influence society by such means. People's hearts and minds cannot accept or implement social forms dictated from without. They can no longer say to themselves: 'This person knows what is needed, so we will do what he thinks right.'

This present book, which has already reached a fairly wide audience, takes account of the fact that people do not want social ideas imposed upon them. Those who accuse it of Utopianism entirely misunderstand its underlying intentions. And people who themselves wish to think only in Utopian ways, and who therefore read their own ideas into what another has to say, recognize its aims least of all.

It is by now common knowledge among those who really think practically that Utopian ideas lead nowhere, however

convincing they may seem. Yet many still feel that they should propound such ideas to their fellow human beings—for example in the realm of economics. But they should realize that they are wasting their breath, for other people cannot make any use of their suggestions.

It is important to recognize the truth of this, for it points us to an important fact of modern public and political life: the way people think easily loses touch with the demands of reality—economic reality for example. Can we hope to be equal to the disarray and confusion in contemporary life if we tackle it with a kind of thinking which bears little relation to reality?

This may well be an uncomfortable question to ask, for few people like to accept that their thinking is out of touch. Yet we need to admit this if we are to make any headway with the 'social question'. We need to recognize that the divorce between thought and reality is a problem of central importance to all modern civilization. Only by doing so will we start to see what society needs.

What is really involved here is the way in which contemporary intellectual and spiritual life¹ is conducted. In recent times humanity has developed a life of the mind which is highly dependent on political institutions and economic forces. As children we are already 'plugged in' to the educational structure of the state, and are educated in a manner which the economic circumstances of our environment dictate.

It would be easy to think that this leaves us well fitted for modern life. The state, one might imagine, is thus able to shape educational institutions—and therefore almost all intellectual and cultural life—in ways that will best serve human society. Likewise, it is easy to believe that people become useful members of society by being educated in

accordance with the economic realities of their environment, and then, as a result of such education, coming to occupy a place in society which these economic conditions assign to them.

The task of this book, in contrast (and it is one which will be looked upon with little favour in the present climate), is to show that confusion and chaos in public life is directly connected with the dependency of the life of the mind—of spirit and culture—on political and economic factors, and that the liberation of this cultural and spiritual life from such dependency is an important aspect of the burning social problems which beset us.

This involves taking a stand against mistaken but very widespread ideas. The state's control of education has been regarded for a long time as something entirely beneficial for humanity's progress. And people with socialistic ideas can hardly imagine society not educating the individual on its own terms, to serve it.

So people have little inclination to recognize something essential: that what might once, at an earlier stage of human history, have been right and proper can become misplaced and wrong at a later stage. It *was* a necessary stage in the development of human, social relationships for the circles which in medieval times oversaw education and culture to be relieved of this function, and for the state to take control. But to perpetuate this is a serious social error.

The first section of this book aims to demonstrate this. Within the framework of the state, cultural and spiritual life has grown towards freedom; but it cannot become fully free within these strictures. It needs to become autonomous. By its very nature, spiritual life is now asking to be a fully independent limb of the social organism. Education, from which all spiritual and cultural life emerges and develops,

must be administered by the educators, without any interference from political or economic quarters. Every teacher should be allowed time not only to teach but also to be involved in school administration. He would then be able to organize the running of his school with the same care that he gives to his actual teaching. No one who is not fully involved in actual teaching should dictate what a teacher ought to do—not parliament, not even someone who was once a teacher but is no longer. The actual experience of teaching should flow directly into its administration. Of course it goes without saying that such a system relies upon the highest degree of professional competence and objectivity.

One might object that even such a self-governing cultural and spiritual life will not avoid every pitfall, and will also be far from perfect. But we are not asking for perfection. All anyone can do is strive for the best that is possible. A child's developing capacities will truly come to serve society only if those people oversee his education whose judgement is based on independent and purely educational perspectives. How far a child can be helped forward in one way or another is a decision that can be made only within an independent cultural community. And how to implement such decisions is also a matter for such a community alone. From such an independent source the state and the economy can then receive a strength and vitality which would be unavailable if they themselves shape cultural life according to their own perspectives.

Furthermore, even the curriculum and structure of training centres directly serving state or economy should be run by those who administer the free life of the spirit. Law schools, commercial, agricultural and industrial colleges could all be shaped and structured by a life of the mind that

is unconstricted by economic or political pressures. This book is likely to arouse much opposition, especially when the conclusions of such a point of view are correctly drawn. But why should people be opposed to it? Because of an unconscious, anti-social prejudice that believes educators are impractical people, divorced from the realities of life. How could they possibly be able to organize things by themselves and serve practical needs properly? Such organization must of course be taken care of by other, practically minded people, and then the educators can just follow the guidelines laid down for them!

Whoever thinks like this fails to see that it is only when teachers are not *allowed* to decide for themselves either their broadest aims or the smallest details of their activity that they become impractical and remote from reality. However many guidelines are heaped upon them by 'practical' people, they will not be able to educate properly and will not really equip those in their care for the practical business of life. The anti-social tendencies of our time have arisen because people's social sensitivity and awareness is not developed through their education. Social sensitivity can only be developed through a kind of education that is guided and governed by people who are socially sensitive themselves. We will not begin to make headway with the social problems of our times until we see that the way in which we think about education and cultural life is a vital part of the equation. Anti-social tendencies are not only created through economic structures, but also through people behaving in anti-social ways within these structures. And it is anti-social to let young people be educated by teachers who, by having the aims and content of their activity externally and artificially forced upon them, have become divorced from reality.

The state establishes law schools and demands that the law which is taught there be in accordance with its own statutes and views. If, on the other hand, schools were founded which derived their ideas about law from a free and independent life of spirit, and if the state was to receive the fruits of this independent thought, it would be fertilized by ideas rendered living and vital by such independence.

But within this free life of the spirit will stand people who can really grow into the practice of life through their own perspectives. Nothing can become truly practical that derives from an education dictated by so-called 'experts' and delivered by teachers divorced from reality. To be effective, educators need to have formed and formulated their own, practical understanding of life. In the course of this book I shall give some more detailed suggestions about how this general principal of a free life of spirit could be implemented.

Utopian-minded people will approach this book with all sorts of questions. Artists, and others whose work is closely connected with the mind and spirit, will be worried that their talents may not thrive better within a free cultural life than in one in which, as at present, they receive support from the state and economy. Such doubters should remember that this book has no Utopian agenda, that it is not trying to lay down theoretical prescriptions about how things should be. Instead, its aim is to stimulate the formation of social communities, whose shared experience can bring about socially desirable conditions. If we base our view of life on real experience instead of theoretical preconceptions, we will see that creative people would be more likely to find a truer evaluation of their work in a free cultural community whose practice derives from its own independent ideas and values.

The 'social question' is not something that has just surfaced recently and can be solved for good and all by a few people putting their heads together, or by an act of parliament. It is, rather, an integral part of all modern civilization, and is not going to go away. It will have to be addressed again and again at every moment of our further history and evolution. In modern times human society has entered a phase in which social structures continually give rise to anti-social forces. This has to be overcome again and again. Just as an organism that has been fed becomes hungry again after a while, so the social organism passes quickly from a state of order to one of disorder. And just as there is no food that permanently satisfies our hunger, neither is there any universal remedy for our social ills. But people can form communities together, in which real cooperation continually renews social forces. The self-governing spiritual 'limb' of the social organism is one such community.

Now just as free self-government is necessary for a modern life of the spirit, so shared, associative work is the basis of economic life. Modern economics consists of the production, circulation and consumption of goods, by means of which human needs and requirements are met. People are active within this economic world and have their share in it; each individual must participate in it to the extent and in the way that he can. Only the individual himself can sense what he really needs; and only he can decide what he can contribute, through his insight into the overall context. This has not always been so, and is still not so everywhere in the world, though it is predominant in modern civilization.

During the course of humanity's evolution, economic circles have widened. From the closed systems of household economies evolved town economies; and from these in

turn national economies developed. Nowadays we are at the threshold of a world economy. Of course the old systems retain a considerable influence, and, conversely, seeds of the new were already contained within them. But the paths of human destiny are dependent on the fact that this sequence of development has become widespread and dominant.

It would be folly to try to organize economic forces into an abstract world-wide community. Private enterprises and small-scale economies have grown into national economies through the process I outlined, but such national communities are not simply the result of economic forces. The attempt to transform them into mere economic communities has produced the social chaos of recent times. Economic life strives to organize itself in accord with its own nature, to become independent of government institutions and political ideas. But it can only do this if associations are formed along purely economic lines, composed of consumers, traders and producers. Actual conditions would naturally regulate the scope of such associations. If they were too small they would be too costly; if too big, they would be too unmanageable and difficult to oversee. Each association would adjust to actual needs in regulating its trade with others. There is no need to worry, either, that such associations would stop people moving elsewhere whenever they wanted to. As long as *economic* interests rather than government regulations influence a person's transition from one association to another, such transition will be unproblematic. One could imagine arrangements within such associations that function as easily as the circulation of currency.

Specialized knowledge and down-to-earth objectivity can lead to a general harmony of interests within such an

association. Not rules and regulations but people themselves determine production, circulation and consumption of goods, through their direct insight and interests. By active participation in this associative way of working, people can develop the insights and skills they need for it; and goods can circulate at their proper value by means of contracts which balance one interest against another. Such economic cooperation is different from what goes on nowadays in the trade unions, which, although affecting economic life, are structured along political lines. They work like small parliaments; decisions about what one person should do for another are made not on economic but on political grounds. In the associations I have described, on the other hand, there would be no 'wage earners' asserting their collective power to demand the highest possible wage from the 'bosses'. Instead, those producing goods ('workers') would work together with those overseeing and guiding production ('management') and with those interested in using what is produced ('consumers'), so as to determine output and return through price regulation. Such a process cannot take place through political debate. Apart from anything else, there would be no one left to do any work if countless people had to spend all their time negotiating about it. Direct agreements between people, on the other hand, and between associations, would allow work and its regulation to go hand in hand. All that is needed for this to happen is that such agreements correspond both with workers' insights and the consumers' interests.

This is not prescriptive, Utopian thinking. I am not saying how things *ought* to be arranged, but how people *would* arrange things for themselves if they wanted to work together in associations that properly corresponded to their insights and interests.

Human nature itself would see to it that people formed such economic associations, if they were not hindered from doing so by state interference. Needs are a natural part of life. The free life of the spirit can also play an important part, for it gives rise to the necessary social insights. Our own experience can show us that such associative communities can arise all the time, that they are not in the least Utopian. The only thing standing in their way is the modern urge for 'organizing' economic life from without. Such 'organization', which tries to externally enforce cooperation for the purposes of production, has become the obsession of our times. It is the opposite of a free economic association, which *allows* people to unite with one another, to choose to work together, and in which the overall plan of the whole arises through the sense and intent of each individual.

One might object that there is not much use in association between the haves and have-nots, and that it is therefore better for all production and consumption to be regulated 'fairly' from without. But such external organization and regulation constrains the free creativity of each individual and thus deprives economic life of what can arise through this free creativity. And in fact it would be well worth seeing what might, in spite of all prejudice, come about if the haves and the have-nots did work freely together. If economic forces alone were allowed to operate, people with property would necessarily have to reciprocate fairly for production by those without any. Such things are not spoken of nowadays from a natural instinct based on actual experience. They surface instead in sentiments rooted in class and other such interests, rather than in economic factors. Such sentiments developed because people were not able to bring pure economic thinking to bear on the increasingly complicated economic life of modern times.

An unfree life of the spirit has hindered this. Working people are immersed in the routine of their lives, and the forces which operate the economy are opaque to them. Thus they labour away without any actual insight into the overall context of human life. In the associations I have described, in contrast, each individual will learn from the other what he needs to know. Recognition of what is economically possible will come about as a result of individuals pooling their different specific insights and experience and exercising collective judgement.

The only forces active in the free life of the mind and spirit are those inherent in it; and likewise, only those economic factors are active in an associative economic system which arise through the associations themselves. The economic task of an individual becomes clear to him through his cooperation with those he is economically associated with. In this way he will have exactly as much influence on the general economy as corresponds with his output. This book will also aim to show how people unable to make an economic contribution would fit in with this scheme of things. An unhindered, self-structured economic life is capable of protecting the interests of the weak against those of the strong.

There are, then, two independent 'limbs' of the social organism, which can underpin and support each other only because each is autonomous and governs itself by means of the forces inherent in it. But between these two is a third, the truly political element of the social organism, which must allow the judgement and feelings of every single responsible adult to come to expression. In the free life of the mind and spirit everyone plays a part according to his particular capacities; in the economic sphere everyone takes his place in a way that arises naturally from his associative rela-

tionships. In the political and legal sphere, each individual has an equal voice simply through being a human being, quite independently of the capacities with which he shares in the free life of the spirit or of the economic value of the goods he produces in the associative, economic sphere.

I have tried to show in this book that hours and conditions of work are actually a matter for the political and legal sphere of life. It is in this sphere that all are on an equal footing, since it governs only those matters which every single individual is equally competent to make a judgement about. This limb of the social organism is therefore the one in which the rights and obligations of people can be determined and regulated.

The unity of the whole social organism will arise from the independent expression of its three autonomous limbs. This book will show how their cooperative working can be effective in creating fluidity of capital, means of production and the proper use of land and resources. Whoever wants to 'solve' the social question by means of an artificially created schema or any sort of economic Utopia will consider this book impractical. Whoever, on the other hand, wishes to make real experience of life a basis for the kind of cooperative ventures in which people can best perceive and work towards achieving their social tasks will perhaps recognize and value the author's efforts to find a truly practical approach to life.

This book was first published in April 1919. I made subsequent additions in articles published in the magazine *Dreigliederung des Sozialen Organismus* ('The Threefold Social Organism'), later published in a separate volume.²

In both books it will be seen that I am less concerned to examine the *aims* of social reform than the immediate *steps* we need to take. If we base our thinking on the actual

realities of life, we know that particular aims can assume all sorts of different shapes and guises. Only those who use abstract ways of thinking see everything as cut and dried. Such people often reproach the practical realist with being too vague and unclear, and also often believe themselves to be hard-headed and practical. They forget, though, that life can assume the most diverse forms, that it is continually in flux, and that whoever wishes to follow its course must adapt his thinking and feelings to its flow. Only through such thinking can the social tasks of our time be grasped.

The ideas presented in this book have been wrested from an observation of life itself—through which, I trust, they may also be understood.