

# TRANSFORMING SOCIETY: SEEDS FOR A NEW SOCIAL UNDERSTANDING

A Course by Seth Jordan

LESSON 8

## The Whole Social Organism



**EduCareDo**  
International Research and Learning Centre  
based on the work of Rudolf Steiner

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## SECTIONS

Introduction — “An Objective Basis for Morality” | Seeing Who Feeds Us Exercise | Lesson  
Theme — The Whole Social Organism | Between Heaven and Earth | A Brief History of  
the Social Organism | The “Democratic Mood” | “The Right to Police, Not to Initiate” |  
When Democracy Loses Its Meaning | The Lonely Individual and the “Social Mystery” | At  
Eye Level — Standing in the Flow of Different Streams | Right Decision-Making |  
Conflicts of Interest and Misplaced Ideals | Consistent in Our Inconsistency | Assignment  
| Appendices | Works Cited

*“There are few who are at all capable of surveying life as a whole, but in the carrying out of social ideals, a wide outlook on life is indispensable... If we have any idea of moulding social life, we must take part in life in all its fullness, in all its phases.”<sup>1</sup>*

— Rudolf Steiner

## INTRODUCTION – “An Objective Basis for Morality”

As we’ve seen already in this course, the task of societal transformation is not a question of imposing a program upon society, but rather of seeing society as it is, seeing what is simply there and bringing it to its true, healthy expression. For instance, we know that we are a part of the larger society, this larger whole... but do we really *experience* that whole?

At times, Rudolf Steiner described asking a person who is grocery shopping, what it is that they live off of? Most people, he imagined, would reply “Well, I live off my money!” But, in reality, this is an illusion; it is impossible to live off of money. The reality is that our money is only a go-between; on the other side of it are the countless people who have labored to bring those groceries to us. When we strip the economy down to its most basic, we are simply left with this, with people working for one another. That’s all there is.

And yet, I would venture to say, this is rarely what we see. Why? It’s certainly true that the process has become abstracted: money has replaced the immediate barter of goods, and retail stores have replaced more direct markets. These things, then, have gotten in the way, come between us so that we no longer see each other. But it’s also simply the case that we lack interest; we don’t bother to look things square in the face in order to see what’s going on.

You do not have sufficient interest if you think that you can buy yourself something with a \$5 note and do not remember the fact that this brings about a social relationship with certain other human beings and their labor power. You only have an adequate interest when, in your [mental] picture, you are able to substitute for each apparent transaction (such as the exchange of goods for a \$5 note) the real transaction which is linked with it.<sup>2</sup>

Imagine that we did have this experience, that every time we bought something we had a mental picture of the people who labored for us — to feed and clothe us, to heat and cool our houses, to keep our cars running. How many people work for us in a given day? What if

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<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Steiner (from *The Social Future*, 1972 edition, pp. 99-100).

<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Steiner, Bern, 12/12/1918 (from *Social and Antisocial Forces in the Human Being*, p. 11).

all those social connections were real for us? What if we experienced the larger social whole as vividly as we experience our personal lives?

If that was our reality, we might also experience a kind of balancing act of reciprocity. We might ask ourselves, Am I taking more from others than I'm giving? Are people working for me, but I'm shirking my work for them? Steiner described this realization as the beginning of a sense of responsibility that can dawn on us when we recognize the interconnectedness of economic life. Have we come into this world to take advantage of others and have them toil for us? How do we labor in return?



Illustration by American cartoonist David Horsey, 1988

And there is still a greater whole of which we are a part, but whose reality is even more difficult to fathom and rare to experience. We are not just one humanity, laboring for one another, we are also one earth. Steiner described this throughout his work, one notable place being his *Outline of Esoteric Science* where he describes at length the earth and humanity as a single organism evolving within the spiritual cosmos. The more this reality can become lived experience, the greater will be our capacity for true empathy with the whole of creation, not based on subjective sympathies and antipathies, but based on a true, objective perception of reality.

At the moment in which man realizes that he has embedded within the total organism of the earth and has no business being a festering boil on the earth's body — at that moment there exists an objective basis for morality.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Steiner, Bielefeld, 3/6/1911 (from "The Significance of Spiritual Research for Moral Action," p. 7).