

REZENSIONEN / BOOK REVIEWS

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Robert Rose. *Transforming criticisms of Anthroposophy and Waldorf education – Evolution, race and the quest for a global ethics*. Centre for Philosophy and Anthroposophy, UK (E-book, available from the author at robertrose1@hotmail.co.uk).

Everyone devoted to Anthroposophy and Steiner education are probably well aware of the criticisms (not to say *attacks*) that have been and continue to be directed towards these movements. One of the most serious charges against Steiner is that his teachings are basically racist, something that has been repeatedly and systematically claimed by Peter Staudenmeier (for instance 2000, 2008). Given that Steiner education has recently gained some recognition by the government in the UK, it seems that such criticisms have now become more common than they have been hitherto in that country. It is therefore quite appropriate that someone takes on the rather ungrateful task of answering such criticisms; something that all committed Anthroposophists are really obliged to do. In his E-book *Transforming criticisms of Anthroposophy and Waldorf education* Robert Rose has done a good job in showing that the charge of racism is basically unfounded. In almost 200 pages he deals in detail with many quotes from the critics and, by quoting the relevant texts by Steiner, shows how the critics distort Steiner's ideas by quoting him out of context and neglecting passages that are crucial for understanding Steiner's meaning and intention.

The book has 10 chapters. The first is an introduction to the field. The second deals with the question how to define racism: what are the criteria for justly claiming that a teaching, a theory or an ideology is racist? This question is of course of basic importance to the whole undertaking. One of the

conclusions is that for Steiner the term "race" really means very different things in different contexts (related to how the term was used in Theosophy). The following chapters then deal with the meaning of race in the different contexts that Steiner talked or wrote about: evolution (chpt 3), the ancient past (chpt 4), the present (chpt 5) and the future (chpt 6). Chapters 7 – 10 are devoted to how Steiner envisaged the overcoming of racism through individual inner development (chpt 7), social values/social threefolding (chpt 8), internationalism/cosmopolitanism (chpt 9) and education (chpt 10).

So what are the criteria for naming a theory racist? Drawing upon sociological and philosophical resources Rose comes to the following answer. A racist theory or ideology is a view that:

1. is held dogmatically irrespective of empirical evidence;
2. essentially there is only a biological meaning to the term "race";
3. includes a "principle of harm", including hate of the Other;
4. asserts that race is a universal property that necessarily denies individuality;
5. negates universal humanity;
6. claims the absolute superiority of one race over all others;
7. claims that human beings are determined exclusively by their biology and denies the self-determination of the individual.

I will comment upon these seven characteristics of racism later on. For now let us accept them, because they are obviously quite reasonable. Judged by these criteria it is clear that Anthroposophy is not a racist view of the world. Steiner did not propagate his ideas as dogmas to simply be believed in; he talked of "race" not only in a biological sense; he did not hold any "principle of harm" towards other races; he pitted human individuality *against* the outer conditioning of race (in whatever meaning of the term); the principle of universal humanity

is central to his teachings; for Steiner all races have positive as well as negative characteristics and no race has *absolute* superiority; and finally, the potential for inner self-determination, transcending one's outer social or biological conditioning, is of central significance to Anthroposophy.

This is a summary of the central message of the book, except for the basic importance that Rose, following Steiner, ascribes to education as a means to strengthen the forces of inner self-determination, the love for universal humanity, peace between nations and mutual aid and support between all peoples of the earth. However, it may be worthwhile to look a bit closer at how Rose answers some of the more specific criticisms.

Regarding race in the context of evolution, Rose points out that Steiner really wanted "to integrate a natural science understanding of the evolution of the human body with that of a spiritual science view of soul and spirit; i.e. of the evolution of consciousness" (p. 61). This means that Steiner's concept of race is wider and more complex than the mere biological understanding of natural science. This contradicts the essentially biological understanding of race common to all racist theories, including the idea that individual human beings are basically determined by the physiology of their race. Nevertheless, there is also a certain overlap between Steiner's account of human evolution and that of present day evolutionary biology. The latter envisages that various versions or species of human beings have replaced one another during the course of evolution. Steiner also does so, although he uses the term "race" instead of "species". As Rose remarks, "Even in modern science we all have strange ancestors that at one point were something like humans but also 'like' kangaroos and reptiles, but were yet not one of them" (p. 62). In other words, there is nothing racist in presuming that some "races" have to die out in the evolutionary process. In this context, what Steiner calls "race" is much more like what science calls ancient species, which are now extinct. Where Steiner differs from common science is in his theory that small groups of human beings can be more highly developed than their fellows due to their *inner soul powers*. Such soul powers may eventually express themselves also in a biological form, producing the basis for a new "race". Therefore they are not the *result* of racial/biological characteristics, which would be a racist view; rather the opposite is the case.

According to Steiner, the race concept is fully applicable only to the Atlantean epoch. The biological races of present humanity are only *remnants* of the racial differences that existed on Atlantis, and they will be gradually dissolved during this present, post-Atlantean epoch. However, critics often use quotes derived from Steiner's texts about Atlantis to prove his "racist doctrines", not considering that this period of human history is long past and that Steiner even claimed that *all* of present humanity has evolved from *one* Atlantean "race", whose nature was very different from how we think of race today. As for human evolution in the present epoch, it is better understood by concepts of culture or civilisation, even though Steiner sometimes used the term "race" for these things, due to his adoption of theosophical terminology. Thus, if Steiner sometimes talks about the flowering and decline of "races" in the present epoch, he is basically talking about cultures or civilisations, and the idea that civilisations have periods of flowering as well as of decline is common to most historians; it is not a racist doctrine.

A further important point in Steiner's thinking is that exogamy and interracial marriage is *good* from an evolutionary point of view. It will contribute to the gradual disappearing of "race" as we now understand it. According to Steiner, "this mixing of blood, which *sooner or later* takes place among *all peoples*, signifies the birth of the external understanding, the birth of the intellect" (quoted on p. 75, emphasis by Rose). A racist theory would hardly accept the mixing of races. That interracial marriage is becoming more and more frequent in our "shrinking world" seems to be fully in line with Steiner's view of the future of human evolution.

Another text that the critics often use to "prove" that Steiner was a racist, or had racist inclinations, is *The Mission of the Folk Souls*. What the critics neglect is that Steiner here very rarely speaks about *biological* differences and that he strongly emphasises that the purpose of understanding the natures of different peoples and nations is to inspire us to "unselfishly dedicate the best that is in us, our sympathy and compassion, to the well-being of all mankind" and "to call upon them [the folk souls] to work in harmonious cooperation" (quoted on p. 78). This points to the global ethics of universal humanity that Steiner was dedicated to promote and develop through Anthroposophy and its practical applications, not least in education.

Summing up this chapter, Rose distinguishes four different meanings of “race” in Steiner’s ideas about human evolution:

1. ancient extinct species;
2. biological race;
3. civilisation, or nation;
4. moral community based on ethical individualism.

So far, I have not dealt explicitly with the fourth meaning. It is related to the idea that the powers and qualities of the human soul/spirit are relatively independent of the biological nature of our bodies; hence of race in the biological sense. The stronger the human “I” or individuality becomes, the more it is able to affect its biological body. The development of the “I” is correlated with the development of ethical individualism as described by Steiner in *Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*. According to Steiner, the future of human evolution can only be understood in terms of moral communities arising as the result of individual soul developments. It is of course at this point that Steiner’s educational ideas become highly relevant, as Rose also shows in the last chapter of the book.

Thus, with Rose we can conclude that contrary to what Staudenmeier and other critics claim, biological race is for Steiner something that can and must be *transcended*. It is not a central point of his teaching; it is only one stage in the evolutionary metamorphoses of humanity. *Central* for Steiner is the moral purpose of evolution: that for each human being, “Love is the outcome of wisdom reborn in the ‘I’ of man” (Steiner, quoted on p. 80).

As I said in the beginning, Rose has done a good job in refuting the accusations of racism. Still, I would like to make some comments, not so much directed against the book as such but more towards the general situation that the book is meant to address. To start with, Rose often points to the basic distinction between “ontological” (I would rather say empirical or factual) differences between races, and moral judgments about such differences. This is important because, as he also points out, some critics today hold the view that talking about mere empirical differences is actually enough for being justly labelled a racist. From this point of view, no moral judgment about one race being “better” than the others is needed (this view is probably a consequence of a radically constructivist theory of knowledge). Rose

rejects this view, holding that a necessary criteria for a theory to be called racist is that it holds some “principle of harm”; that is, a notion that other races should be denied certain human rights or in other ways deserve worse treatment than the “superior” race. Obviously, no such “principle of harm” can be found in Steiner’s thinking, but he *does* speak about possible factual differences between races and ethnic groups.

The thing is that our present cultural situation is actually over-sensitive to the issue of racism. Therefore, many reasonable people agree with the view that even to talk about factual differences borders on racism, or is at least problematic. For instance, Howard Gardner, famous for his theory of multiple intelligences, points out that some empirical research questions, such as those about possible racial differences in intelligence(s), *are better not pursued*, “because the results of these studies are likely to be incendiary” (Gardner, 2006, p. 239). I have also heard that in medical research there is a resistance to publish findings about biological/medical differences between races, although the facts are there for anyone to see. The reason for this over-sensitivity is probably that such empirical findings, although obviously not racist in themselves, can nevertheless be used as support for racist ideologies. It is this present cultural climate that makes Steiner’s views on the purely factual differences between races problematic for some people.

Those who have studied Steiner’s ideas know that there are instances where he talks about one race/culture being more “advanced” than another, but again implying only a factual difference with no moral implications. For instance, present Western culture is according to him more advanced from a technological perspective, but it is also more materialistic; hence *not* more advanced from a “spiritual perspective”, as Rose points out (p. 75; perhaps better to say a *spiritualistic* perspective, since the technological advancement is also, ontologically speaking, spiritual in nature). As Rose points out, the possible “advancement” of one race/culture over another is never meant by Steiner in an absolute, but only in a relative sense. There are more advanced and less advanced qualities and abilities in all races/cultures. A racist ideology, on the other hand, would hold that one race is more advanced in an *absolute* sense.

However, the problem is that people with racist agendas may also use ideas of *relative* superiority.

Or perhaps it is better to talk about quasi-racism here, for the reason that many or most right wing immigration hostile political parties today are not racist in the traditional sense, at least not openly. Their official view is rather that other races or ethnic groups are OK as long as they stay in the geographical area where they belong. But they do not belong “here” because they are so different from “us”. “We” have other values than “they”. For instance, they could argue (though I have not seen it done) that “we” (Caucasians) are generally more developed intellectually/scientifically (according to mainstream standards of intellectuality), and in our culture/society such abilities are highly valued. In this relative respect it makes “us” more advanced and it makes it difficult for “us” to accommodate people who are not similarly advanced. Therefore, such people do not belong among “us” and they can live a better life in their own culture/society, where other qualities/abilities are valued. Thus, the idea that some people are more evolutionary “advanced” only in a relative sense is *also* problematic in our present cultural climate.

Another feature of Steiner’s talks/texts on racial differences that creates some problem today is that he often seems to have used the present tense although he was actually referring to the past (in most languages it is possible to talk about the past in a present tense, once you have established the time context). An example is the following, taken from one of Steiner’s lectures to the workers (p. 88 in Rose’s book):

On one side you have the black race, which is the most earthly. When it migrates to the west, it dies out. We also have the yellow race, which is midway between earth and the cosmos. When it migrates to the east, it becomes brown, attaches itself too much to the cosmos, and it dies out. *The white race is the future, it is the most spirit-building race.* When whites migrated to India, they trained the inner, poetic, artistic, spiritual culture of India. If it now migrates to the west, it will develop a spirituality that does not take so much of the inner man, but sees the outer world in its spirituality. (Italics by Rose)

If this is read and understood as talking about present or relatively recent times, it appears to express racist ideas, or at least to have racist implications.

However, as Rose painstakingly points out, the reference here is to an historical epoch long time past and the “white race” is not the present Caucasian race. But of course, critics with an anti-Steiner agenda will easily neglect the time context and can rather convincingly “prove” Steiner’s racist ideology simply by quoting him verbatim.

I have already said that Rose has done a thorough job in pointing out all the mistakes that anti-Steiner critics do when they represent his teachings as basically racist. Reasonable people will probably be convinced by Rose’s book, even if they have not read Steiner themselves. Unfortunately, however, I do not think that Staudenmeier and his colleagues will change their minds by reading this book (or any other book with the same purpose). Counterarguments are always possible to construe, if the will is there, and it certainly seems to be. The critics also seem to already be aware of many of Rose’s arguments and to have answered them, for instance – as Rose himself notes – by saying that Steiner’s propagation of universal human values was simply an unconscious contradiction to his racist ideas and that it is not uncommon for a thinker to contradict himself. Rose’s book will not silence the anti-Steiner critics, but it may at least make other people think twice before they believe them, and that is worth a lot.

References

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