

Rezension / Book review



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Albert Schmelzer:

Rudolf Steiner at the Tension Point between a Philosophy of Freedom and Human Rights, Nation and "Race".

Frankfurt/ M.: Info 3 Verlag 2025.

Besides the repeatedly posed question of the scientific status of anthroposophy – which, fundamentally, implies the question of the scientific status of spiritual teachings as such – the topic of “race” is the field that places Steiner most strongly in the public spotlight. It is far more emotionally charged than the rather abstract epistemological debates about scientificity and is much better suited to generating attention on social media and in talk shows.

Given the agitation connected with this topic, Albert Schmelzer’s very attempt to work through it calmly, systematically, and critically is already a meritorious undertaking. In the book named in the title, he presents a detailed and highly readable investigation of the question of whether Steiner’s work contains indications of racist thinking. His inquiry follows Steiner’s life trajectory and meticulously analyzes the different thematic emphases in Steiner’s work with a view to the guiding perspective named in the title.

Schmelzer is concerned not only with tracking down and naming problematic passages in Steiner’s texts on the hot-button issue of “race,” but with the question of whether a more or less continuous, coherent viewpoint on this topic can be discerned in Steiner’s work – and how individual remarks and digressions are to be weighed.

A clear result that the reader can draw from Schmelzer’s analysis should be stated at the outset: there is no uniformity and no sustained treatment of the topic of “race” in Steiner’s work. Moreover, the term occurs hardly at all in Steiner’s own authored writings, but primarily in some transcripts of his roughly 6,000 lectures given to specific audiences. In these transcripts, however, one finds at times pointed statements that do not merely speak neutrally about “race” but, by today’s standards, contain racist value judgments. What cannot be demonstrated at all in Steiner’s work, on the other hand, are political agitations on this topic.

Structure of the book

After a brief look at the relevant literature and its sometimes controversial viewpoints, Schmelzer, for good reason, places before his investigation of Steiner’s work and biography a chapter on the historical framework conditions. This chapter shows the presence of the topic of “race” independently of Steiner – in the time in which he lived, and beyond – as well as the numerous facets through which it was socially effective.

This opening is important, because it allows Steiner’s handling of this topic to be measured not only by today’s standards – which have been significantly sharpened by grave political events of

the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries – but also by the historical and social circumstances of his epoch, that is, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In the fifteen chapters that follow, Schmelzer examines his topic chronologically along the stages of Steiner's life and work. Four aspects guide him:

- Steiner's philosophy of freedom
- Steiner's socio-political views
- his excursions on peoplehood and nation
- his statements on the topic of "race"

Method and conclusion

Schmelzer's investigation is detailed, sober, and unsparing, written from the perspective of an observing historian. His aim is to compile the material in such a way that the reader is enabled to make an informed assessment of their own. To this end, the

chapters each end with summaries. In the concluding assessment, the author also allows himself an overall evaluation in light of the four aspects mentioned. His analyses are nuanced and substantiated, as he refers back to relevant passages previously discussed. They sharpen the field of tension named in the title, but they do not resolve it—since this tension belongs to Steiner's transmitted textual corpus.

Overall assessment

Schmelzer's book sets a new standard in dealing with the topic of "race" in Steiner: on the one hand, he unfolds the topic meticulously along Steiner's biography, clearly identifying and evaluating problematic passages. On the other hand, he situates the topic both in the context of its time and within Steiner's overall work. In this way, the reader is given a robust basis for forming their own judgment beyond hate-mongering and whitewashing.

A book well worth reading for all who do not shy away from such a controversial topic and who prefer differentiation to quick judgments.
