

Epistemology, the Epoché and Critical Race Theory: Inner Freedom from Research Prejudice

By Dr Robert Rose

In recent discussions about the allegations of moderate racism in some of Steiner's literature, I have come across a particular standpoint which needs addressing in the anthroposophical movement. There are some, particularly those who are involved in the Waldorf movement, who are ready and willing to admit and apologise for a limited form of racism in Steiner and are wanting to take steps to eradicate any potential influence this may have had in the schools. After an extended conversation which included asking for evidence and good reason, it became clear to me that the acceptance of limited racism is based purely on assumptions derived from the fantastical myths propagated by the opponents of anthroposophy. These myths now seem to have been absorbed by the movement including a pathological mode of reasoning. Whilst it is recognised here that certain things need to be "seen to be done" for political and social reasons, I am not of the conviction that this should be carried out on the basis of Untruths and the absence of knowledge. This is also the case for proposed solutions to the mythical allegations. If anything, the Anthroposophical society and the Waldorf movement should be striving towards being "movements of knowledge" not "movements of assumption and mythical untruths".

As an antidote to this, I want to look at a particular aspect on Steiner's view of knowledge. I want then also to consider how this might be applied to one of the supposed solutions to racism. Rudolf Steiner proposed that epistemology is the foundation of all knowledge. It is that human activity through which the contents of knowledge are acquired. In his later writings he referred to this as the "path of knowledge". In connection with the question of racism this raises a specific question: how is our knowledge of this acquired?

A particular approach to the solution of racism is proposed by a view called “Critical Race Theory”. One of its founders, Richard Delgado, describes some of its fundamental tenets: 1) racism is everywhere, in every human interaction; 2) interest convergence: white people only help people of colour when it is in their interest to do so; 3) Race is a Social Construct not Biology; 4) all situations are racialised; 5) intersectionality: that race identity overlaps with other identities, such as gender; 6) Unique Voice of Colour: that people of colour have a unique story to tell. There are many aspects to each of these, but one is very prominent: by what process are these tenets **known**? That is, how are they known to be the true or are they just assumptions or limited in time and space? When asked about the process of knowledge, a respected colleague from within the Waldorf movement replied:

“I think people who focus on criticising CRT are missing the point: we are some decades from the time when this will become an intellectual argument. If you hold on to the one-sidedness of critical race theory in order to relativise your “guilt” you are “overthinking and underfeeling” the issue: it’s a classic example of white privilege. You are compartmentalising the discussion in academic terms *because you can afford to do so*: you have never suffered the direct consequences of the cards being stacked against you. You can argue in favour of a balanced, rational approach because you have no reason to be angry.”

This answer is completely in the style of Critical Race Theory, its unique *modus operandi*. It was an unexpected answer as the question I put to my colleague was concerned with approaching CRT from what Steiner called a “presuppositionless” approach to knowing. Clearly the answer given is full of the presuppositions of CRT. Whatever one thinks of the above statement, it does not answer the question of an assumption-free epistemic approach, either to racism generally or CRT specifically. The difficulty is this: in the acquisition of knowledge, the process, the epistemology, of that knowledge should not assume the truth of that which is to be discovered, or determined. The epistemic process itself should not include the concept outcomes in its premises and activity. What we see in the above quote is the exact opposite of this: it assumes the truth of the very thing that is as yet to be determined. As such, its import is to block the knowledge process and avoid the question being asked. Whether there is such a thing as universal “white privilege” or universal “white guilt” may be an outcome of an epistemic process, but it cannot be assumed **at the beginning** of process itself.

In my view, we need a presuppositionless approach not one laden with assumptions. This is encapsulated by Steiner in his “Truth and Knowledge”. There he made the following points which I think are relevant to the discussion about Critical Race Theory:

“Epistemology is the scientific study of what all other sciences presuppose without examining it: *cognition* itself. It is thus a philosophical science, fundamental to all other sciences. Only through epistemology can we learn the value and significance of all insight gained through the other sciences. Thus it provides the foundation for all scientific effort. It is obvious that it can fulfil its proper function only by making no presuppositions itself, as far as this is possible, about man's faculty of knowledge.” (Steiner, R, Truth and Knowledge, Preliminary Remarks, paragraph 1).

“The discussion which follows aims so to formulate the problem of cognition that in this very formulation it will do full justice to the essential feature of **epistemology, namely, the fact that it is a science which must contain no presuppositions.**” Steiner, R, Truth and Knowledge, Preliminary Remarks, paragraph 2, (my bold).

Steiner goes on to make the case that the knowledge activity is best served when the knower practices self-knowledge, through self-observation and critical evaluation of what and how one knows. He sets this position in contrast to ***naive consciousness***:

“In all our activities, two things must be taken into account: the **activity itself**, and our **knowledge of its laws**. We may be completely absorbed in the activity without worrying about its laws. The artist is in this position when he does not reflect about the laws according to which he creates, but *applies* them, using feeling and sensitivity. We may call him “naive.” **It is possible, however, to observe oneself, and enquire into the laws inherent in one's own activity, thus abandoning the naive consciousness just described through knowing exactly the scope of and justification for what one does. This I shall call *critical*.** I believe this definition comes nearest to the meaning of this concept as it has been used in philosophy, with greater or lesser clarity, ever since Kant. Critical reflection then is the opposite of the naive approach. A critical attitude is one that comes to grips with the laws of its own activity in order to discover their reliability and limits. **Epistemology can only be a critical science.** For its object is an essentially subjective activity of man: *cognition*,

and it wishes to demonstrate the **laws inherent in cognition**. Thus everything “naive” must be excluded from this science. Its strength must lie in doing precisely what many thinkers, inclined more toward the practical doing of things, pride themselves that they have never done, namely, “think about thinking.”” Steiner, R (1892): Truth and Knowledge, Rudolf Steiner Publications, Chapter 3, last two paragraphs. (My bold and italics)

For me this means, in terms of the research process, all should be evaluated about CRT, no assumptions about its truth or falsehood, either as a whole or in its parts, no declarations of convictions, but a presuppositionless search. This requires a critical stance in which all thoughts, feelings and actions are evaluated and freed from conceptual assumptions, emotional inertia and repetitive will.

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