

Rudolf Steiner on “Race” – Overcoming Racism through the Ideals of Love, Freedom and Progress – a Context for the Future

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Introduction

As most people will know, Rudolf Steiner had some unusual ideas. This is also the case in his use of the term “race”. Today, many would probably think of race in terms of physical appearance such as skin colour and form, what one might consider the physical biology of race. But for Steiner, the word “race” went beyond biology and he used the term as a means for the classification of things which have nothing to do with biology at all, either in the past, present or future. This is one of the reasons why some accuse Steiner of racism: simply because they lack the living thinking that he applied to the use of words. Such people are like those who would think that an acorn defines an oak tree, or a baby defines the adult.

A particular case for what the word can mean to Steiner is what may be called the “context of the future”. It is perhaps a little unusual to call a spiritual / moral community a “race”. But those with sufficient cognitive fluidity will perceive what Steiner is trying to do here, namely find a term for a group of people dedicated to an ethical approach to life. Of course, we are free to choose other words, but this is the word he used in one particular place. Obviously, this should not be confused with the biological meaning of the term “race” as defined by contemporary biology and sociology. For Steiner, the meaning of “race” in relation to the future is defined by concepts like ***individual freedom, universal love and progress***; these stand in complete opposition to the biological determinism of racism.

Steiner did, on occasion, also use the word in the way that we do. So why was this important to him? He did, for example, make a positive claim and that an understanding of race was significant for the future:

“It is particularly important because the destiny of mankind in the near future will bring men together in far greater measure than has hitherto been the case in order to fulfil the mission common to all mankind. But members of the individual peoples will only be able to offer their proper, free and positive contributions if they have, above all, an understanding of their ethnic origin, an understanding of what we might call “the self-knowledge of the folk”... This maxim will have a certain significance for the activity of mankind in the future.” (Steiner 1910/70, p. 23)

Steiner’s general view is that **all** “races” have a positive significance for the future of human evolution. There is no negative and no asymmetry in Steiner’s proposition as would be the case for a racist view.

Anthroposophy as a Principle of Peace

Steiner makes the case that relationships between all the people, races and nations of the World should be based on peace. This is founded on his conviction that through anthroposophy we can understand that our highest being lies in the universally human. This is shown in the following paragraph:

“When we stand on a pure anthroposophical foundation, when we develop the high truths for our souls, which touch humanity’s **highest being**, then we stand on ground that is **beyond all nationality and all racial differences**... these same truths are valid for the whole Earth... as soon as these **highest truths** that concern humanity come into consideration” (Steiner 1914-21, p 33/4) (My bold).

For Steiner, his fundamental idea was to enable global understanding between nations and races. This he considered the “highest” ideal that humanity could strive for and which would make possible realistic solutions to aspirations based on national and racial differences and enable peaceful coexistence.

Through this, Steiner was committed to a peaceful solution to the World's problems even in opposition to strife and hate and that he was a pacifist in all things and to all people:

“We do not fight, we do something different: we cultivate love, and we know that, with this cultivation of love, strife must disappear. We do not place strife against strife. We place love, in that we carefully nurse it, against strife... We work for the pouring out of love and found a society that is built on love. That is our ideal... It is not through strife that one overcomes strife, not through hate that one overcomes hate, but that, in truth, strife and hate are overcome only through love” (Steiner 1906, p. 55).

The Peaceful Unification of the Races

Steiner did not say that the white race as present today would continue into the future and that the others would die out. This is a pernicious view propagated by critics of anthroposophy. As a matter of fact, as the next quote shows, Steiner argued that in the future **all** races would gradually cease to have significance and will unite under moral principles and form a new kind of moral community: “with the principles of **progress**, of inner **freedom**, of brotherly **love**, a small band from every tribe and every nation” (Steiner 1908/77, p. 140) (My bold).

Moreover, Steiner was committed to the overcoming of racial divisions in the future:

“Therefore, in its fundamental nature, the anthroposophical movement, which is to prepare the sixth period, must cast aside the division into races. It must seek to unite people of all races and nations, and to bridge the divisions and differences between various groups of people. The old point of view of race has physical character, but what will prevail in the future will have a more spiritual character.” (Steiner 1909/90, pp. 12-13)

More importantly, the way he uses the term “race” in relation to the future is about the forming of a **community** according to **spiritual / moral principles** not racial **biology**. As such, for Steiner, argued that it is up to each individual “I” to make their own choices; the “choice” is not determined by biology. Racism as conceived of today is partly defined by the idea of biological determinism. According to this, whether or not an individual belongs to such a “race” is not a question of choice, thought, feeling or action, but one of biology. In this context, however, Steiner is saying something quite different: firstly, being a member of the future “race” (moral community) is not due to biological causation; rather it is a question of every individual (irrespective of biological race) choosing and living **spiritual** and **ennobling** principles. For Steiner, the future “races” are nothing to do with race as we conceive them today; they are about **living** according to the good (or evil) principles, not biological determinism. As such, these “spiritual and ennobling principles” of the “good race” (that really is a distributed spiritual / moral community) would allow a unification of the supposedly biological races into a new spiritual and moral community that would enable a positive evolution in the future.

The Resolution of “I”

For Steiner the human individual, this “I”, is of an individual spiritual nature, not of biological race. For him, this individual “I” is the centre of future Earth evolution. Speaking of how wisdom evolves into love he claims:

“This is the secret of all future evolution... Then in the “I” of man, it is turned inward. From Earth evolution onward, the Wisdom of the outer world becomes inner Wisdom – Wisdom in man himself. And when thus resurrected in the inner life, in the “I” of man, it grows into the seed of Love... Love is the outcome of Wisdom re-born in the “I” of man” (Steiner 1909 / 63, p. 312).

As can be seen, no mention of “race” is present in the biological sense of the term, but rather of “man” or “humanity” (in the original German text “*mensch*” means “humanity”). In other words, for Steiner the concern was for the evolution of **all** human beings irrespective of racial origin. The wisdom and love he speaks of is a potentiality for **all** of humanity, not for one specific biological group.

The Marriage of Peoples

Steiner's real views were the exact opposite to racism. Again, in his lectures on the "*Apocalypse of St John*", he says speaking of the next cultural epoch to come:

"It will be different for the next epoch which will succeed all these cultures there will not be a colony limited to one place, but from the general body of mankind will everywhere be recruited those who are mature enough to form the good, the beautiful side of the next civilisation... there is the possibility that from ***all races of the World*** will be recruited those who really understand the call of the Earth mission, who raise up the living Christ in themselves, who develop the ***principle of brotherly love*** over the whole Earth... not in the sense of Christian confessions, but in the sense of true esoteric Christianity." (Steiner 1908/77, p. 133) (My emphasis)

For Steiner, brotherly love and other moral values were the unifying principles that could unite all the races. To ascribe to him an extreme and destructive form of white supremacy, as some critics do, is a complete falsehood. As has been shown, for him, what was important was that ***all*** peoples of the world, through the agency of individuals, could create a positive future. His view of the future was not one of white or European supremacy, but one of the "mighty marriage" of peoples:

"The nations which today are the vehicles of Western culture were chosen to lead the fifth age to its zenith; they were the nations who were to develop the intellect. Hence wherever the Western culture extends we have predominantly the culture of the intellect, which is still not finished. This intelligence will extend further; people will exercise still more of their spiritual forces in order to satisfy their bodily needs; to slay one another they will employ much greater spiritual forces before the great War of All against All... endless amounts of energy will be exercised in order to satisfy the lower impulses. But in the midst of it something is being prepared, with which certain nations of the East, the northern part of the East, are gifted... a spiritual impulse... the opposite pole of

intelligence... we shall experience something like a **mighty marriage of peoples**, a marriage between intelligence and intellect and spirituality.” (Steiner 1908/77, p. 134) (My bold)

Obviously, Steiner did not see Western culture as the most advanced civilisation of all time nor as the end point of social evolution as a “white supremacist” would have to. For Steiner each culture has a “task” and will be succeeded by others. In his view Western culture has its positives and negatives. As he saw it, one of its positives is the ability to use the intellect in the transformation of nature in order to satisfy bodily needs, such as the invention of machines for practical purposes (such as with the industrial revolution). On the negative side it can lead to War, conflict, oppression and destruction when combined with egoism and its extension into nationalism. Contrary to this, the future for Steiner was a “mighty marriage of peoples”, of East and West [and one should add north and south], based on a unification of the intellect with spiritual and moral principles. Of course, much has changed since Steiner’s time and the western origin of the industrial revolution has long been transcended so some of what he predicted may well have been achieved.

Transcending the War of All against All

Steiner’s interpretation of the “*Apocalypse of St John*” is where he conceptualises the idea of a future “race”. This is a lecture series about the possible **distant future** of humanity; it is not primarily about the past or the present races. Later on in the text Steiner speaks about a far future state of the world where he interprets the Apocalypse of St John as predicting that there will be a “War of All against All”:

“After the War of All against All, there will be two streams of mankind: on the one hand the stream of Philadelphia will survive with the principles of **progress**, of inner **freedom**, of brotherly **love**, a small band from **every tribe** and **every nation**; and on the other hand the great mass of those who will be lukewarm... the stream of Laodicea” (Steiner 1908/77, p. 140) (My bold).

This is no racist statement, quite the contrary; it is a description of the possible unification of all kinds of races (every tribe and nation) under the principles of progress, freedom and love. In this context, Steiner’s main concern was with the future of all humankind through these principles

and that it lies within each individual to connect themselves with them. This “theory” is not rigidly bound to a particular biological race, as a racist theory would be, but is about the development of a new type of “race” (moral community) formed by the spiritual principles of progress, freedom and love. For Steiner, no person is causally determined by their racial biology, we become a new kind of “race” (community) by **self-identifying** ourselves with specific spiritual and moral principles such as “progress, freedom and love”. Arguably, for Steiner, those who are indifferent to, or even against, progress, freedom and love may be considered by Steiner to be “Lukewarm”. In either case, Steiner would have considered this to be a choice open to every **individual** to make and not down to the biological determinism of a specific **biological race**.

Human Futures: Love versus Egoism

Moreover, when speaking of this “War of All against All”, he envisages this not as a conflict between the peoples or races of the World but between those individuals committed to egoism:

“this War must be pictured quite differently from the way we are accustomed to think about wars... Its foundation or cause is the increase of egoism, of self-seeking and selfishness on the part of man” (Steiner 1908/77, p. 136).

He then contrasts this with those who are committed to universal love:

“Thus the ego will be the pledge for the highest goal of man. But at the same time, **if it does not discover love**, if it hardens within itself, it is the tempter that plunges him into the abyss. Then it becomes what separates men from one another, what brings them to the great War of All against All, not only to the War of nation against nation... but to the War of each single person against every other person in every branch of life; to the war of class against class, of caste against caste, and sex against sex. Thus in every field of life the ego will become the bone of contention; and hence we may say that it can lead to the highest and on the other hand to the lowest” (Steiner 1908/77, p. 137) (my emphasis).

This is how he conceptualises the two “races” the “good” and the “evil”; he identifies them with the particular moral qualities of “brotherly love” and “egoism” respectively, not with biological race. For Steiner, the extreme form of egoism leads to conflict in every area of human existence, whilst love leads to peace. He furthermore does not envisage that the “good race” will destroy the “evil race”, rather that it will help redeem it:

“After the great War of All against All, gradually the evil stream will be lead over to the good by the good race, by the good stream. This will be one of the principle tasks after the great War of All against All; to rescue what can be rescued from those who after the great War will only have the impulse to fight one another and allow the ego to express itself in the most external egoism” (Steiner 1908/77, pp. 140/1).

It is these two qualities of brotherly love and egoism that, for Steiner, identifies the two “races”, not biological inheritance. Put in other words, the community based on brotherly love will try to help the other community overcome their egoism. For Steiner, egoism leads to conflict whilst brotherly love leads to a peaceful future for all humanity:

“True Anthroposophy can only be put forward as a final goal; the community of free and independent egos, of egos that have become individualised. It is just this that is the mission of the Earth, which is expressed in love.” (Steiner 1908, pp. 137).

One can see in this that Steiner’s view of evolution was one of individuals becoming free and independent egos who are willing to cultivate love between all the peoples of the World. Such a view is the opposite of any kind of racism. The future “good race” has nothing to do with racial biology and is entirely to do with the choice of individuals:

“Love would be impossible for man and freedom would be impossible for man without the possibility of sailing down into the abyss. A man unable of his ***own free decision***, to choose good or evil, would be a being lead on a leading string to a good which must be

attained by necessity and who had no power to choose the good of his own free purified will, by the love which springs from freedom.” (Steiner 1908/77, p. 206)(My emphasis)

This freedom is the antithesis of that which is at the foundation of the biological determinism of racism. A racist theory cannot allow for individuality free of biology; for such a view, being a member of a race is not a question of choice, there are no exceptions for individuals for this view and group membership is determined by the biological state and causation. In contrast, the question of belonging to a “moral community” (chapter 3) is down to the freedom of choice, thought, feeling and action of the **individual**. It is the latter of these that was Steiner’s view.

The Meaning of Spiritual / Moral Community

In terms of the future, Steiner’s use of the term “race” took on a specific meaning according to his theory of evolution. So what is Steiner’s view of the future? Steiner, in his “*Apocalypse of St John*”, envisaged a new kind of community which he sometimes referred to as a “race”, but is not to be confused with biological race. He described it as being derived from “every tribe and every nation” based on the moral principles of “progress, freedom and love” (Steiner 1908/77, p. 140). This is a concept of a **spiritual / moral community** that is inclusive of all races and is formed through the agency of **ethical individuals** (Steiner 1963, p. 175):

“That is why it is absolutely essential to understand that our anthroposophical movement is a spiritual one. It looks to the spirit and overcomes the effects of physical differences through the force of being a spiritual movement... Humanity is becoming evermore individual, and this has further implications for human individuality. It is important that this individuality develop in the right way... In light of this, we can describe this anthroposophical movement as leading a person to grasp correctly what is called the “**I**” [**the individual spirit**], the innermost member of the human being... What is entering humanity through the anthroposophical movement concerns every human being **regardless of race or nationality**. This movement speaks only to the new humanity, the new human being — not to an abstract concept “human being,” but to every individual... Full understanding between individuals is hardly

possible today, except when what is to be communicated comes from the **centre** of one individual's being and speaks to, and is understood rightly by, the **centre** of another.” (Steiner 1909a/1916) (My emphasis).

So, rather than the agency of “race” being central to Steiner, it is the agency of the individual “I”, that is **central** to human development and to the forming of **moral communities** through concepts like progress, freedom and love. For Steiner this can only occur through the agency of each individual “I”. For him, nothing in human life is ineluctable or caused by the determining power of race, all humans are free agents capable of forming and determining moral communities; it is not the membership of a biological race which determines our future, but our free individual creativity and choice. He made this clear in his early work “*The Philosophy of Freedom (Spiritual Activity)*” and it never changed throughout his life. His commitment to ethical individualism in the forming of communities is absolutely central to every part of his thought:

“To *live* in love of the action and to *let live*, having understanding of the other person’s will, is the fundamental principle of *free human beings*... The free man does not demand agreement from his fellow men, but he expects it because it lies in human nature” (Steiner 1963, p. 181).

These are not ideas that can be present in any kind of racist theory, but are derived from a view of the World where individuals matter, not their membership of a particular race.

Moreover, this “I”, as he showed in his “*Mission of the Folk Souls*”, was important for Steiner in that he also made distinctions between the progressive evolution of “**races**” to **nations** to **civilisations** and to **individuals** (Steiner 1910/70, p. 80/1). **Steiner only speaks of biological races on a few occasions; they are neither the goal of his evolutionary thought nor to Anthroposophy.** Clearly, for Steiner, the human community of the future is meant to be more than just about biology, it is about communities of human beings forming under moral or spiritual principles. For him, in the long term, all the peoples of the Earth could find peaceful unity derived from these moral values and realised by individuals.

Steiner's hope for the future was to promote tolerance and peaceful cooperation between all the races, peoples and nations of the Earth and he encouraged supporters of Anthroposophy to live their lives accordingly:

“What alone accords with Anthroposophical teaching is that we should unselfishly dedicate the best that is in us, our sympathy and compassion, to the well-being of all mankind... and live, not for ourselves but for all human beings, then that is true anthroposophical tolerance... Spiritual Science, as we shall realise more and more clearly, will bring an end to the divisions of mankind. Therefore now is the right moment to learn to know the Folk Souls, because the province of Spiritual Science is not to promote antagonism between them, but to call upon them to work in harmonious cooperation... The more we practice this, the better anthroposophists we are.” (Steiner 1910/70, p. 185)

This was written at the conclusion of the lecture cycle “*The Mission of the Folk Souls*”, where critics claim Steiner expressed racist views. As can be seen, nothing could have been further from the truth. The cycle was held four years before the outbreak of the First World War. His ideas of “sympathy and compassion” and “harmonious cooperation” stand in complete opposition to the then emerging conflict of the 1914-18 war between the peoples and nations of the World.

A Three-fold Unification of the Races

Steiner foresaw a unification of the world's different races on three levels in accordance with his threefold understanding of the human being. On the physical level, he argued that miscegenation (racial mixing) is positive for evolution. The following quotes are not just about the past but also the future:

“miscegenation and contact between different peoples have played significant role at certain periods. Now not only the mixture of peoples and their interrelationships which lead to the introduction of foreign blood, but also the psychic and spiritual development of the Folk Spirits have played a decisive part” (Steiner 1910/70, p. 171).

This position was first stated in his *“Occult Significance of Blood”*:

“Exogamy inoculates man with new blood, and this **breaking-down of the tribal principle**, 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... But this mingling of blood which comes about through exogamy is also that which at the same time obliterates the clairvoyance of earlier days, **in order that humanity may evolve to a higher stage of development**” (Steiner 1906b, paragraph 72)(my emphasis).

So for Steiner, races as we understand them today will have ceased to be by the end of the seventh cultural epoch (in about six to seven thousand years time by his way of calculation) through a threefold process of unification:

This is how Steiner foresaw the possible and gradual unification of the races over the present and the next two cultural epochs: as due to the free spiritual “I”, through miscegenation on the physical/bodily level, and through a bringing together of the spiritual/soul cognitive and moral powers into a higher unity. Through this process, a deeper ethical and physical individualisation may evolve and cultivate an ever increasing diversity on all levels.

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