

Anthroposophy's racial doctrines

Much of my research on the history of anthroposophy focuses on the role of racial theory in the works of Rudolf Steiner and his followers. In my assessment, there are both racist and non-racist components in anthroposophy's race doctrines, and these doctrines are central to the anthroposophical worldview as a whole. Steiner's teachings on race and ethnicity, both as they appear in his published texts and as developed and elaborated by his followers, are complex and contradictory, and many anthroposophists today understand them in ways markedly different from critical scholarly analysis. As with other variants of theosophy, these racial doctrines occupy a crucial position within the overall structure of anthroposophy. Steiner's racial and ethnic teachings are central to anthroposophical conceptions of cosmic progress, individual spiritual advancement, karma, reincarnation, spiritual evolution, the correspondence between the higher spiritual realms and the physical plane, and the relation between the human and the divine. Above all, race and ethnicity form a pivotal part of anthroposophy's narrative of cosmic evolution, which is in turn an essential component of anthroposophical doctrine. Due in part to the shifting historical significance and social connotations of racial concepts and terminology in the course of the last century, anthroposophists today often appear reluctant to confront these aspects of Steiner's work and of anthroposophy's ideological inheritance. In my estimation, this impedes a historically informed and accurate evaluation of anthroposophical teachings.

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And here are some Steiner quotes, from official translations of his works:

"We are within the great Root Race of humanity that has peopled the earth since the land on which we now live rose up out of the inundations of the ocean. Ever since the Atlantean Race began slowly to disappear, the great Aryan Race has been the dominant one on earth. If we contemplate ourselves, we here in Europe are thus the fifth Sub-Race of the great Aryan Root Race."

Rudolf Steiner, *The Temple Legend*, London 1997, p. 201; lecture from 1905 on "The Relationship of Occultism to the Theosophical Movement"

"Besides the separate individuals, a very real family and national group soul and racial spirit is at work in the life of a family, a people, or a race. Indeed, in a certain sense the separate individuals are merely the executive organs of these family group souls, racial spirits, and so on. It is nothing but the truth to say, for instance, that a national group soul makes use of each individual man belonging to that nation for the execution of some work. The group soul of a people does not descend into physical reality but dwells in the higher worlds and, in order to work in the physical world, makes use of the physical organs of each individual human being. In a higher sense, it is like an architect making use of workmen for executing

the details of a building. In the truest sense, everyone receives his allotted task from his family, national, or racial group soul."

Rudolf Steiner, Knowledge of Higher Worlds, London 1993, p. 197

"For peoples and races are but steps leading to pure humanity. A race or a nation stands so much the higher, the more perfectly its members express the pure, ideal human type, the further they have worked their way from the physical and perishable to the supersensible and imperishable. The evolution of man through the incarnations in ever higher national and racial forms is thus a process of liberation. Man must finally appear in harmonious perfection.

Steiner, Knowledge of Higher Worlds p. 207.

"The ancestors of the Atlanteans lived in a region which has disappeared, the main part of which lay south of contemporary Asia. In theosophical writings they are called the Lemurians. After they had passed through various stages of development the greatest part of them declined. These became stunted men, whose descendants still inhabit certain parts of the earth today as so-called savage tribes. Only a small part of Lemurian humanity was capable of further development. From this part the Atlanteans were formed.

Later, something similar again took place. The greatest part of the Atlantean population declined, and from a small portion are descended the so-called Aryans who comprise present-day civilized humanity. According to the nomenclature of the science of the spirit, the Lemurians, Atlanteans and Aryans are root races of mankind. If one imagines that two such root races preceded the Lemurians and that two will succeed the Aryans in the future, one obtains a total of seven. One always arises from another in the manner just indicated with respect to the Lemurians, Atlanteans, and Aryans. Each root race has physical and mental characteristics which are quite different from those of the preceding one. While, for example, the Atlanteans especially developed memory and everything connected with it, at the present time it is the task of the Aryans to develop the faculty of thought and all that belongs to it.

In each root race various stages must also be gone through. There are always seven of these. In the beginning of a period identified with a root race, its principal characteristics are in a youthful condition; slowly they attain maturity and finally enter a decline. The population of a root race is thereby divided into seven sub-races. But one must not imagine that one subrace immediately disappears when a new one develops. Each one may maintain itself for a long time while others are developing beside it. Thus there are always populations which show different stages of development living beside each other on earth."

Rudolf Steiner, *Cosmic Memory: Prehistory of Earth and Man*, New York 1987, pp. 45-47.

"Every human being has his particular virtues and vices but in matters connected with the etheric body a certain similarity prevails. This can be seen in the characteristics that have to do with race, with nationality. Because of this we see that each individual does not have an Archangel to himself in respect of his etheric body but that it is whole nationalities and races which are guided by higher and lower Spirits of Fire. The peoples and races of our earth are indeed guided by the spirits called Archangels or Spirits of Fire. Here our view expands to something that to many people is a complete abstraction, but which is a reality to those who are able to see into the spiritual world. If anyone today speaks of the Folk-Soul or the Folk-Spirit this is considered an abstraction. It is not so to the occult observer. He sees a whole people as it were embedded together in a spiritual substance, and this spiritual substance is the body of a Spirit of Fire. From hoary antiquity to the present day our earth has been led and guided from people to people, from race to race, by the Spirits of Fire whose bodies are the Folk-Souls and who are in charge of the course of earthly evolution."

Rudolf Steiner, *Universe, Earth and Man*, London 1987, pp. 48-49.

"The forces which determine man's racial character follow this cosmic pattern. The American Indians died out, not because of European persecutions, but because they were destined to succumb to those forces which hastened their extinction."

Steiner, *The Mission of the Folk Souls*, London 2005, p. 76.

"It was in the fifth stage when this emigration began; so that the specially chosen population of Atlantis which lies at the foundation of our culture is taken from the fifth Atlantean race, for in Atlantis we may speak of races. A sixth and a seventh followed. These were, so to speak, the lukewarm races. They also survived the great flood but there was no living sprouting force in them. They were related to the fifth Atlantean civilization somewhat as the bark which is lignified and hardened is related to the sappy stem. These two races which followed the actual root-race were incapable of developing, they were overripe, so to speak. You may still see stragglers of these old overripe races to-day, especially among the Chinese. This Chinese people is characterized by the fact that it has not identified itself with what was manifested in the fifth race, the root-race. It was when the etheric body entered into the physical body that man received the

first germs which enabled him to say "I". They had passed over that period; they had, however, thereby developed the high civilization which is known to-day but which was not capable of development. The fifth Atlantean race sent its people everywhere, and they founded new civilizations, civilizations capable of growing and becoming more perfect. Indeed, this all developed from the ancient Indian civilization to our own. The sixth and seventh races of Atlantis allowed themselves to become hardened and therefore became stationary. As we have said, the Chinese civilization is a remainder of that ancient civilization. The old Chinese possessed a wonderful Atlantean heritage, but they could not progress any further."

Steiner, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, London 1958, p. 140.

"You might now be inclined to say: Is it not an extremely bitter thought that whole bodies of peoples remain immature and do not develop their capacities; that only a small group becomes capable of providing the germ for the next civilization? This thought will no longer disquiet you if you distinguish between race-development and individual soul-development, for no soul is condemned to remain in one particular race. The race may fall behind; the community of people may remain backward, but the souls progress beyond the several races. If we wish to form a true conception of this we must say that all the souls now living in bodies in civilized countries were formerly incarnated in Atlantean bodies. A few developed there in the requisite manner, and did not remain in Atlantean bodies. As they had developed further they could become the souls of the bodies which had also progressed further. Only the souls which as souls had remained backward had to take bodies which as bodies had remained at a lower stage. If all the souls had progressed, the backward races would either have decreased very much in population, or the bodies would be occupied by newly incoming souls at a low stage of development. For there are always souls which can inhabit backward bodies. No soul is bound to a backward body if it does not bind itself to it.

The relation between soul-development and race-development is preserved to us in a wonderful myth. Let us imagine race following race, civilization following civilization. The soul going through its earth mission in the right way is incarnated in a certain race; it strives upward in this race, and acquires the capacities of this race in order next time to be incarnated in a higher one. Only the souls which sink in the race and do not work out of the physical materiality, are held back in the race by their own weight, as one might say. They appear a second time in the same race and eventually a third time in bodies in similarly formed races. Such souls hold back the bodies of the race. This has been wonderfully described in a legend. We know, indeed, that man progresses further in the fulfillment of the mission of the earth by following the great Leaders of humanity who point out the goals to be attained; if he rejects them, if he does not follow them, he must remain behind with his race, for he cannot then get beyond it. Let us think of a personality who has the good fortune to meet a great Leader of humanity, let us suppose such a personality confronting Christ Jesus himself, for example; he sees how all his deeds are evidence for leading humanity forward, but he will have

nothing to do with this progress, he rejects the Leader of humanity. Such a personality, such a soul would be condemned to remain in the race. If we follow this thought to its conclusion such a soul would have to appear again and again in the same race, and we have the legend of Ahasuerus who had to appear in the same race again and again because he rejected Christ Jesus. Great truths concerning the evolution of humanity are placed before us in such a legend as this."

Steiner, *The Apocalypse of St. John* pp. 79-81.

"Of paramount importance in their Atlantean descendants was that the germ of the ego, the consciousness of self, the foundations of which were already basically there from ancient Lemurian times on, went through a progressive development on the earth. If mankind had not to a large extent migrated to Atlantis, the active development of the ego would not have come about. For the Lemurian population would have gradually died out, having to succumb to passions, and the best souls of the North would not have descended to earth at all, for they would not have been able to find suitable bodies. The under-developed bodies of earlier times would not have provided them with the possibility of developing a strong consciousness of self within the bodily nature. Through the fact that the better sections of the Lemurian population migrated to Atlantis, the human body evolved its form to the extent that it could become the bearer of self-consciousness in a harmonious way. And it was only in the course of time that the human body acquired this form in the regions corresponding to the present temperate zones."

Steiner, *The Being of Man and His Future Evolution*, London 1981, pp. 116-117.

"Thus it was the normal human beings that were the best material for the initiates to use for the evolution of the future, and they were also the ones that the great sun initiate, Manu, gathered around him as being most capable of evolving. Those peoples whose ego impulses developed too strongly, so that it permeated their whole being and made it a manifestation of ego hood, these people gradually wandered to the West and became the nation the last survivors of which appeared as the Red Indians of America. Those people whose ego-feeling was too little developed migrated to the East, and the survivors of these people became the subsequent Negro population of Africa. If you look at those things in a really spiritual scientific way you will see evidence of them right into the physical characteristics. If a man brings his whole inner being to expression in his physiognomy and on the surface of his body, then it permeates his external being with the colour of his inner nature as it were."

Steiner, *The Being of Man and His Future Evolution* p. 118.

"Those people, however, who had developed their ego being too little, and who were too exposed to the influences of the sun, were like plants: they deposited too many carbonic constituents beneath their skin and became black. This is why the Negroes are black. Thus both east of Atlantis in the black population and west of Atlantis in the red population we find survivors of the kind of people who had not developed their ego-feeling in a normal way. The human beings who had developed normally lent themselves best to progress."

Steiner, *The Being of Man and His Future Evolution* p. 119.

"Look at the colours to be found in Asia, from the Negroes to the yellow races. Hence you have bodies that are sheaths for every possible level of soul, from the completely passive Negro soul entirely given up the outer world of physical existence, to the other levels of passive souls in every possible part of Asia. Various characteristics of the evolution of the Asiatic and African peoples will now be comprehensible to you: they present various combinations of surrender to the environment and the external manifestation of ego-feeling. So fundamentally we have two groups of people representing combinations: those on European soil, forming the root stock of the white population, who had predominantly developed the feeling of personality, but who did not migrate to where the feeling of personality permeated the whole body, but to where the ego-feeling became more inward. Therefore in western Asia and partly in North Africa and the countries of Europe, too, in earlier times you find a people with a strong inner ego-feeling, but who on the whole were not given to losing themselves in the outer world; their inner character was strong and firm, but it did not set its imprint on the bodily nature. On the other hand there are those peoples in Asia with passive, self-effacing natures in whom just this passivity expresses itself in the highest degree. This makes the people dreamy, and the etheric body penetrates very deeply into the physical body. That is the fundamental difference between the European and the Asiatic peoples."

Steiner, *The Being of Man and His Future Evolution* p. 120-121.

"But all such questions are illuminated as soon as we recognize the nature of the spiritual essence which lies at the back of our blood. Who can deny that this question is closely linked to that of race, which at the present time is once more coming markedly to the front? Yet this question of race is one that we can never understand until we understand the mysteries of the blood and of the results accruing from the mingling of the blood of different races. And finally, there is yet one other question, the importance of which is becoming more and more acute as we endeavor to extricate ourselves from the hitherto aimless methods of dealing with it, and seek to approach it in its more comprehensive bearings. This problem is that of colonisation, which crops up wherever civilised races come into contact with the uncivilised: namely — To what extent are uncivilised peoples capable of becoming civilised? How can a Negro or an utterly barbaric savage become

civilised? And in what way ought we to deal with them? And here we have to consider not only the feelings due to a vague morality, but we are also confronted by great, serious, and vital problems of existence itself. Those who are not aware of the conditions governing a people — whether it be on the up- or down-grade of its evolution, and whether the one or the other is a matter conditioned by its blood — such people as these will, indeed, be unlikely to hit on the right mode of introducing civilisation to an alien race. These are all matters which arise as soon as the Blood Question is touched upon."

Rudolf Steiner, *The Occult Significance of Blood*, London 1967, pp. 12-13.

"The use of the French language quite certainly corrupts the soul. The soul acquires nothing more than the possibility of clichés. Those who enthusiastically speak French transfer that to other languages. The French are also ruining what maintains their dead language, namely, their blood. The French are committing the terrible brutality of moving black people to Europe, but it works, in an even worse way, back on France. It has an enormous effect on the blood and the race and contributes considerably toward French decadence. The French as a race are reverting."

Rudolf Steiner, *Faculty Meetings With Rudolf Steiner*, New York 1998, pp. 558-559.

"In time, however, blondness will disappear because the human race is becoming weaker. In the end, only brown- and black-haired people will be able to survive if nothing is done to keep them from being bound to matter. The stronger the body's forces, the weaker the soul's. When fair people become extinct, the human race will face the danger of becoming dense if a spiritual science like Anthroposophy is not accepted. Anthroposophy does not have to take the body into consideration but can bring forth intelligence from spiritual investigation itself. You see, when we really study science and history, we must conclude that if people become increasingly strong, they will also become increasingly stupid. If the blonds and blue-eyed people die out, the human race will become increasingly dense if men do not arrive at a form of intelligence that is independent of blondness. Blond hair actually bestows intelligence. In the case of fair people, less nourishment is driven into the eyes and hair; it remains instead in the brain and endows it with intelligence. Brown- and dark-haired people drive the substances into their eyes and hair that the fair people retain in their brains. They then become materialistic and observe only what can immediately be seen. Spiritual science must compensate for this; we must have a spiritual science to the same degree that humanity loses its intelligence along with its fair people."

Rudolf Steiner, *Health and Illness*, New York 1981, pp. 85-6.

"If we want really to understand health and illness, we must bear in mind how complicated the circumstances are. Illness need not be a matter of individual karma only; the karma of a whole people has to be taken into account. An interesting example of how things in the spiritual life are inter-related can be seen in the migration of the Huns and Mongols who poured from Asia into the West. The Mongols were stragglers of the Atlanteans. While the Indians, the Germans and other peoples were progressing, the Mongols had remained behind. Just as the animals have separated off from the evolutionary path of mankind, so have certain lower peoples and races fallen behind. The Mongols were Atlanteans whose physical development had taken a downward course. In the astral bodies of such decadent people an abundance of decaying astral substance can be seen. When the Mongols fell upon the Germans and other Central European peoples, they created a wave of fear and panic. These emotions belong to the astral body, and under such conditions decaying astral substances will flourish. Thus the astral bodies of Europeans became infected and in later generations the infection came out in the physical body, affecting not merely individuals but whole groups of peoples. It emerged as leprosy, that terrible disease which wrought such devastation in the Middle Ages. It was the physical consequence of an influence on the astral body."

Rudolf Steiner, *At the Gates of Spiritual Science*, London 1970, pp. 65-66.

"Asians do not care for the kind of thinking we have in Europe. They want images, like the images you see in the monasteries of Tibet. Asians want images. The abstract notions Europeans have are of no interest to them, they make their heads hurt, and they do not want them."

Steiner, *From Beetroot to Buddhism*, London 1999, p. 229

"Humanity has risen by throwing out the lower forms in order to purify itself and it will rise still higher by separating another kingdom of nature, the kingdom of the evil race. Thus mankind rises upward."

Steiner, *The Apocalypse of St. John* p. 84.