

Racism and Waldorf Education

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*He has gradually vanquished the demon of wine
And he does not get wildly drunk;
But the karma of words remains.*

Po chiu-i (ninth century)

In the Spring of 1994, we gathered a team of classroom experts to visit the Urban Waldorf School in Milwaukee where Waldorf pedagogy was being used to teach the children of the inner city. Some of us had extensive experience with Waldorf schooling, others not, but we were all eager to observe the effects of a gentle and well structured learning environment on children from difficult circumstances. Along with our interest in Waldorf, we all had some doubts about its limited experience with the education of children in the inner city (R.P. McDermott, 1992). We went to the school wanting to learn how it worked and, if it worked well, to tell others about it. We were all delighted with the school, and we wrote a long report and a research paper in praise of it (Byers et al., 1996; McDermott et al., 1996).

This brief note addresses a specific issue that developed in the course of our study of the school, namely, the reality of racism in Waldorf education as well as, apparently, in the teachings of Rudolf Steiner. One of our team members, on the basis of her time at the Urban Waldorf School, has written glowingly about the promise of Waldorf education for African American children (Dillard, 1996). If that promise is to be realized, all members of the Waldorf community will have to appraise critically whatever racism might be inherent in their world view.

In an early version of the large report, we included an account of a racially charged discussion brought to the school by visiting representatives of the international Waldorf community. In a conversation in an office at the school (for which no one from the school was present), Steiner's racist speculations about Africans as close to the body and new to the rational and spiritual heights achieved by whites on the evolutionary ladder were cited as possibly relevant to the education of African American children in Milwaukee. There, in a school using Steiner's ideas in the best possible way, we were treated to a full display of what we would have to worry about if we were to invoke Waldorf without reservation as a model for American education.

Because it might reflect unfairly on the school, some authors objected to reporting the event. The Urban Waldorf School is not only educating children who are normally left out of educational achievement, it is actively confronting racism as well. The dedicated people at the school do not need to be blamed for the misconception of visitors, and we removed the account from the report in exchange for the opportunity to address in these pages one source of the problem, namely, the unfortunate racism that appears latent in the Waldorf school movement.

As the report about the school is gentle and encouraging, this note is equivalently aggressive and confrontational. The tone, in both cases, is with warrant. Whether Waldorf decides to back public schools or not, whether Waldorf decides to give itself to the inner city or not, it is time to consider the possibility that some naive forms of racism are endemic to those who embrace anthroposophy without a strong critical sense for the real possibility that Steiner's speculations about the racial organization of culture and consciousness were wrong. After the incident in Milwaukee, with a minimum of attention on our part, a handful of similar stories from other Waldorf schools working with African American and Jewish populations began to emerge. These stories were told by the offended party only, and we cannot cite them

as exacting evidence of racism in Waldorf. To sound an alarm, we need only to identify them as examples of the kind of race-related discussions that, despite their being easy to misstate, mishear, or misquote, can be found in Waldorf contexts. We cite them as evidence of nothing more than that the Waldorf community, likely because of Steiner's writings on race, is vulnerable to such misunderstandings.

- A white mother of a successful biracial (African American and white) child loved her son's Waldorf school but had to work constantly against teachers who would tell her of the evolutionary limits of Black children.
- A Jewish professor looking for alternative methods of schooling was told that a Jewish person could not be a Waldorf teacher.

There is peril in these words, and they are fortunately contradicted by the actions of many Waldorf educators running schools, for example, in the Black townships of South Africa and the inner city of Milwaukee. More important, they are contradicted by the few African American and many Jewish teachers in Waldorf schools. But there is a consistency to the complaints. One version of Waldorf schools is that they are the place to find such utterances mixed in with more competent accounts of and commitments to the complexities of the world.

In The Netherlands, the Dutch government recently launched an investigation of Waldorf schools on charges that they openly teach racism (*de Volkskrant*, 4 February, 1995). Fortunately, the inquiry placed the responsibility for the problem at the feet of individual teachers who were reading Steiner uncritically and using his theories on race as curriculum written in stone. Given that the cited texts came from Steiner, and given that anthroposophy is one intellectual environment in which such racist texts are available for discussion, the inquiry also advised that the Waldorf system be more careful. In Appendix I, we offer a translation of a more recent article from the same newspaper with an account of a deepening crisis. In America, an equivalent charge, if not confronted quickly and carefully, would lead not only to the destruction of the Waldorf school movement, it would also mean that many American children would miss out on the contribution that an emerging Waldorf influence might bring to classrooms around the country. The same world that needs so much help from Waldorf education can make use of charges of racism to make things even worse.

Is Waldorf education up to the challenge of leading American education away from the treachery of various racisms? It may be in Milwaukee, but what of the schools that are yielding the examples cited above? Rudolf Steiner was in many ways a part of his culture. One vestige of nineteenth-century German culture, phrased in its most pernicious and uni-lineal form as the progress that led to the triumph of the white, Christian and rational modes of thought, can be found in Steiner's thinking about the evolution of consciousness. Although scholarly interpreters of Steiner show repeatedly that his theory of evolution was multi-lineal and unusually critical of how the West had bought the myth of science and rationality at the cost of not understanding the full complexities of the human situation (Robert McDermott, 1989; Sloan, 1991, 1992), much of Steiner's writing can be read—some would say misinterpreted—through contemporary sensitivities as Eurocentric in the worst sense of the term.

In his popular lectures on folk-souls (*Volkgeist*), Steiner (1910/1971) was careful to deny the claim that European whites are “superior” to other races, although the reason is that “all men in their different incarnations pass through the various races” (p. 76). The distinction does not save him from talking freely about the five races of the world as if they were quite different kinds of humanity, each with a different place in the evolution of consciousness, right down to the blood that courses through their bodies. In twentieth-century biology, race has become a highly suspect category for the description of human variation, and whether one distinguishes five or five hundred races, the chosen terms in general contain more human variation within each category than across categories (see Cavalli-Sforza and Cavalli-Sforza,

1995 for an updated account; many of the insights were stated well by a previous generation, for example, in the essays in Montague, 1964). It is exactly this kind of imprecision that allows various cultural groups to use racial categories to harbor prejudice and symbolic violence. In choosing to use the accepted folk terms for race - by color: black, red, white, yellow and brown - Steiner may have been using an unfortunate dimension of his own culture to explicate his inquiry into human evolution. In a later lecture, Steiner (1923) exacerbates the difficulty with the claim that racial history is the key to understanding the different modes of thought available to people, and worse, he traces the various ways of thinking right down to the propensity of members of different races to rely on different parts of the brain. His speculations on the importance of skin color are uninformed, racist and far behind the intellectual developments even of his own time.

The pernicious, unilineal version of the evolution of consciousness suggests that through history, in some significant ways, Europe makes progress over Asia and Africa, Christianity makes progress over Judaism and rational science makes progress over traditional ways of thinking. Each advance has a price - white people, for example, get limited to rational at the expense of more spiritual ways of knowing-but each is in its way a step that promises a cumulative progress. Steiner's account of the mental capacities and habits of different peoples around the world is insensitive. His speculations are surprising in comparison to the riches evident in other inquiries by German intellectuals interested in nonwestern ways of thinking; easily available to Steiner, for example, were the writings of Leibniz (1716/1994) on the mind of the Chinese, of von Humboldt (1831/1971) on the thought and language of the Malays and of anthropologist Franz Boas (1911) on racist accounts of primitive people. Anthroposophists unwilling to acknowledge the oversight have missed the point of what is essential in Steiner's educational thought.

Although Steiner urged his followers to think for themselves and to adjust his insights for new circumstances, a social study of anthroposophists in England found that many of them considered Steiner infallible (Ahern, 1984). If Steiner's theories do not provide an adequate safeguard from being accepted uncritically by Waldorf teachers, then his writings on race could be dangerous. It is difficult to imagine how his speculations on the evolution of consciousness among different peoples could be applied to individual children from different traditions without being racist. Few theories about how the universe works can be easily applied to the full complexity of individual lives. When any spiritual tradition accepts a multi-lived, karmic account of an individual child, there is always a considerable risk of misjudgment. When a key category in the interpretation of the child's karmic path through multiple lives is the individual child's skin color or ethnic background, it is more than a risk: it is racism, and it is intolerable. It is time to sound the alarm against the possibility that Waldorf teachers could be using such ideas to guide their thinking about children in their classes.

Whatever Steiner did say, whatever he might say if he were alive today, if only a few Waldorf teachers can nurture what might be a Steiner derived anti-Semitic or anti-African American prejudice, then Waldorf educators will have to critique themselves before their pedagogy can be of systematic use across the country. The offending texts must be identified, criticized, explained if possible and disowned if necessary. Appendix II offers an example from Steiner's *The Mission of Folk-Souls*. More than the passages from the Dutch newspaper quoted in Appendix I, this text is at the core of the Steiner canon. It can be read perhaps by scholars familiar with a wide range of Steiner's writings as having nothing to do with the current arrangements among groups of persons designated by various racial terms either around the world or, now far from the soils that nurtured their races of origin, within American cities. Without an extensive explanation of the text, however, it is much easier to read the passage as simple racism, with black people once again treated as the simple children of the earth, close to their senses and instincts, and no doubt in need of guidance from those less driven by the instincts of the body. A non-critical reading of such texts could have been a source for the Dutch Waldorf teacher investigated for teaching her class about the exceptional sense of rhythm shared by contemporary black persons.

Waldorf teachers are going to have to add racism to the list of concerns they must worry about every day before entering the classroom. The legacy of color racism is karma to American democracy in much the same way that anti-Semitism follows Christianity. If Waldorf teachers do not take this challenge to heart, then Waldorf schools have no place in American education.

In Milwaukee, Waldorf has given genuinely and critically to the inner city. With respect to racism, the Urban Waldorf School seemed to the review team more trustworthy than most schools, be they public or Waldorf. At its best, the school has allowed racial issues to emerge forcefully. Faculty members are aware that they must not only confront the results of racism on their children, they must confront the very conditions that organize that racism. One teacher agreed that the children at Urban Waldorf are happy but wondered if that is enough. "White people," he noted, "have always wanted black children to be happy. There is no trouble that way." Making children happy despite unhappy circumstances is an achievement, but Waldorf schools are expected to do more.

It is a primary principle of Waldorf education to assume that making children happy in the long run requires that the children are affirmed in their own strength in the world beyond the school. If Urban Waldorf can successfully confront racism and develop educational practices leading to happy, self-affirmed and critical children, it would be a profound contribution to the children, to the Waldorf movement and to American education. We wonder if all Waldorf teachers are in turn ready to learn from the inner city how to challenge some of Steiner's dated and unacceptable speculations.

We can end with two sources of hope. As a follow-up to the crisis in The Netherlands, German students of anthroposophy have put together a small volume reporting and analyzing various fragments of racism that appear in the hundreds of volumes under Steiner's name (Dietz, 1995). Some of the texts, having been transcribed by friends from discussions with Steiner, can be questioned as to their authenticity; others, such as the one reported in the newspaper translated in Appendix I, can be disowned as seemingly unconnected to the rest of Steiner's thought; still others, e.g., the text in Appendix II, are closer to the core of Steiner's thought and can be either reinterpreted in terms of their historical context or disowned at the cost of radically reinterpreting a major theme in Steiner's work.

On the American side, in response to an early version of this paper, the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America, in a letter from its Chairman, David Alsop (8 October 1995), has declared its opposition to any form of racism and its hope that the incidents described in this paper are rarities and/or misinterpretations.

We have resolved to take an honest and penetrating look at ourselves and our schools to see if indeed racist attitudes and behavior exist, and to make every effort to change if this is the case.

The quick response by both the German anthroposophical and the American Waldorf communities is most heartening. The struggle against racism in human affairs is likely endless, and a strong commitment to confront racism in education is only a first step. If the great majority of Waldorf teachers put their considerable energies and sensitivities to the task, we can all look forward to more progress on the issue.

Appendix 1

“Some of Steiner’s Writings Are in Fact Racist” (from Dutch newspaper, *de Volkskrant*, 14 August 1995: translated by Ida Oberman)

How should a Waldorf school handle the following statement, in 1922, of its founder Rudolf Steiner: “I am convinced that if we get yet another set of Negro novels and give them to pregnant women to read, then Negroes do not have to come to Europe to conceive mulattos; just by reading Negro novels, half-blood children will be born in Europe” (from Steiner’s “Health and Illness”).

Does anthroposophist Steiner only want to indicate that a certain Negro novel is excessively dull? Is it a statement that has to be read in the context of its time? Or does anthroposophy clearly go too far here?

M. Seelen, a teacher at the de Geert Groote Waldorf School in Amsterdam, says that anthroposophists have gone too far. This past summer, he studied Steiner’s works and concluded that they in fact contain racist elements. In the school’s information booklet for the coming year, Seelen explicitly distanced the school from Steiner’s racist remarks. The school is the first of the 60 Waldorf schools in The Netherlands to confront directly the racism in Steiner’s writings.

“Steiner was a child of his age,” says Seelen. “He made a number of statements which I would now call disputable. But he was certainly not a racist. His teachings remain a great source of inspiration to us.”

The Waldorf schools made the news earlier this year, when it became public that a teacher in Zuphen told his students to write in their notebooks, in a lesson on “race,” that black people have thick lips and that developmentally they are in the infant stage. “The teacher made a mistake,” says Seelen. “The curriculum materials at the Waldorf school are put together by the teachers on the basis of Steiner’s pedagogical writings. Everyone knows that what Steiner said as a philosopher should never be used as instructional material.”

The [federal] school inspector agreed and concluded that the approach in Zuphen was not representative of all Waldorf schools. Nonetheless, the subject remains volatile. For example, two students at the Waldorf school were threatened with expulsion for wanting to discuss the question of racist prejudices in Steiner’s writings.

“The topic is delicate.” Seelen observes. “Teachers at Waldorf schools are incredibly involved in their work. Criticism from the outside is often perceived as threatening.” Seelen is trying to stimulate discussion within the anthroposophical community and hopes that other Waldorf schools will recognize that Steiner is not infallible.

Vice-President of the Anthroposophical Association of The Netherlands and a teacher at the Waldorf school in The Hague, C. Weigart, is afraid that these events will lead to a split in the Waldorf community between those he calls the “realo’s” and the “fundamentalists.” Weigart further argues that “Steiner never made statements now considered racist in any discussion of Waldorf education. Does it make sense, then, to ask each Waldorf school now to make a point of distancing itself from these statements?”

According to Weigart, Steiner’s anthroposophical texts can only be understood on the basis of thorough research. Seelen, on the other hand, points to the findings of a research project, to be published soon, covering 350 volumes in Steiner’s collected works. The researchers conclude that the volumes contain a number of racist passages. For encouragement, Seelen also points to Steiner’s own words in *Science of the Mysteries of the Soul*; Steiner encouraged careful readers “to test what they read through personal insights and life experiences.”

Appendix II (from Rudolf Steiner 1910/1971: 75 -6)

[There is] for example a point or center of cosmic influence situated in the interior of Africa. At this center are active all those terrestrial forces emanating from the soil which can influence man especially during his childhood. Later on their influence diminishes; man is less subject to these forces. Nevertheless their formative influence makes a powerful impression upon him. The locality where people live exercises its most potent influence in early childhood and thereby determines for their whole life those who are completely dependent on these forces, so that the particular locality impresses the characteristics of their early childhood permanently upon them. This is more or less typical of all those who, in respect to their racial character, are determined by the etheric formative forces of the earth in the neighborhood of that local locality. The black or Negro race is substantially determined by these childhood characteristics.

If we now cross over to Asia, we find a point or center where the formative forces of the earth impress permanently on man the particular characteristics of later youth or adolescence and determine his racial character. Such races are the yellow and brown races of our time.

If we continue northward and then turn in a westerly direction towards Europe, a third point or center is reached which permanently impresses upon man the characteristics of his adult life. In this way man is determined by the etheric forces emanating from the earth. When we look more closely into these separate points or centers we find that they follow a line which takes an unusual direction. These centers still exist today. The center in Africa corresponds to those terrestrial forces which imprint on man the characteristics of early childhood; the center in Asia corresponds to those which give man the characteristics of youth, and the corresponding center in Europe imprints upon man the characteristics of maturity. This is a simple universal law. Since all men in their different incarnations pass through the various races the claim that the European is superior to the black and yellow races has no real validity.

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