

Rudolf Steiner's Efforts to Encourage Cultural Diversity

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Rudolf Steiner spoke out on occasion against cultural homogenization. Indeed, he energetically advocated that which he alone considered "healing," namely, a multicultural society in which the autonomy of each culture is not violated.

In this regard Rudolf Steiner even took concrete political action. With the help of leaflet campaigns and by soliciting signatures from prominent people, he opposed State suppression of minorities. In lieu of a centralized state he called for three autonomous entities: 1) an independent and spiritual/ cultural life, particularly also for people of different ethnic origins who live in the same area, 2) a legal system with the same basic rights for all, and 3) an economic life composed of associations among producers, consumers and distributors.

In 1922, after the first world war there were plans to attach Upper Silesia - an ethnically mixed region - to either Poland or Prussia, or to separate the "ethnically cleansed" cultural groups. Rudolf Steiner launched a political effort with the goal of getting the Silesians of both ethnic groups to reject, under protest, being attached to either Poland or Prussia. In his "Call to Save Upper Silesia" he wrote: "The situation in Upper Silesia particularly calls out for such a threefold system. Here two cultures, two cultural individualities - which are intermingled with each other - are fighting for the chance to live in their own way. The most important causes of friction are education and judicial practices. Only by liberating the spiritual/cultural life can these burning questions be resolved, especially in Upper Silesia. Then both cultures, side by side, the German and the Polish, will be able to develop in accord with their inherent forces, without fearing that they will be violated by the other and without a political State taking one or the other side. Each nationality will set up not only its own educational institutions but also its own administrative bodies for cultural matters, so that conflict is ruled out."

Martin Barkhoff sums up Rudolf Steiner's attitude with the following words: "The German State cannot - according to Rudolf Steiner's social impulse - belong to the Germans, but only to all of its residents equally; the State in Poland, Romania, France cannot belong to the Poles, Romanians, French. Rudolf Steiner fought persistently and vigorously for this impulse of a "multi-cultural society in an ethnically mixed state. [...] Thus it is clear that the most brutal resistance to Rudolf Steiner's efforts came from national groups especially. [...]"

"Such groups and militias answered his political activity with terrorist methods which nearly cost him his life and which made it impossible for him to continue speaking publicly in Germany. In the "Völkischer Beobachter" Adolf Hitler referred to the principle of a threefold social order as being one of those "utterly Jewish methods of destroying the normal mental state and spiritual orientation of the people." In fact Rudolf Steiner's intentions did oppose Hitler's, more clearly than for example did the goals of the communists, who consolidated the terror of the Nazis with terror of their own. Rudolf Steiner endeavored instead to remove the emotional basis that would support Hitler's goals."

Steiner prophesied endless bloodshed if preference were given not to the autonomy of the individual but to the nation which suppresses minorities. Right into the present Woodrow Wilson's idea of "self determination of nations" affords dubious power structures and inviolability which are used against the individual ("dissident") and ethnic minorities in the most brutal way. Here we find fertile breeding ground

for State-sanctioned racism - which Rudolf Steiner recognized early on and which he vehemently opposed.

“People over the whole earth are dependent on each other”

In order to brand Rudolf Steiner as a racist, excerpts from a lecture to workers (March 3, 1923) have repeatedly been cited (for example in “Welt am Sonntag”, March 9, 1997 and “taz”, Sept. 28, 1996). However, one notices, if one reads the whole lecture carefully, that where Rudolf Steiner makes any evaluation at all, it is the physical constitution of the white European that comes up worst. “We poor Europeans have our life of thinking in the head. [...] Through this we take in the whole outer world, and we easily become materialists. The Negro does not become a materialist. He remains human inwardly.”

Why? Because, in contrast to the European, he does not so easily lose his relationship to his instinctive life, which Rudolf Steiner refers to here as being representative of the “lively development” of “what is connected to the body and its metabolism”, and which he clearly values as positive. He also attributes a “lively development” of the bodily aspect to white Americans, and again, he sees it as positive: “It is [in the case of Americans] understood more through the whole human being [in contrast to the “poor Europeans” with their head thinking]. That is an advantage of the Americans over the Europeans.” Black people and Americans are already inwardly human where the European still has some developing to do. The European develops it by “creating in spirit”.

Directly following his controversial remarks on the various races Rudolf Steiner clarifies his meaning-. “You see, gentlemen, everything I just described to you has to do with what happens in the human body. The soul and spirit are more or less independent of this.” That such an attitude is the opposite of racism was obvious to the Central Security Office of the German Reich in 1941: “Anthroposophy contradicts the National Socialist doctrine on race. According to the National Socialist view the laws of racial heredity relate not only to the body, but to the whole human being also to soul and spirit. Like the Christian Church, Anthroposophy recognizes essentially only a doctrine of bodily heredity, claiming that only the body stems from its parents, whilst the spirit and soul enter into it from the spirit world. Based on such a purely external view of race, anthroposophy must necessarily arrive at an international pacifist attitude.”

It is true that Rudolf Steiner did not deny that there are differences in the physical makeup of different groups of people. However, he did not draw a racist conclusion from this but spoke instead of the necessity of symbiotic collaboration within a diverse society. As he said in his controversial lecture: “That’s the way it is with the human race. People over the whole earth are dependent on each other. They have to help each other. This follows from their qualities.”