

ANTHROPOSOPHY AND RACISM

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ABSTRACT:

This article provides a detailed exposition of Rudolf Steiner's racial teachings, followed by an overview of how his racial ideas have influenced the Anthroposophical movement in five European countries: Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Italy. There is substantial evidence that Steiner and many of his leading followers persistently promoted ideas about race that align closely with those espoused by white supremacists. The article also summarises and analyses the main lines of defence put forward within the Anthroposophical movement in response to critiques of Steiner's racial teachings.

KEYWORDS:

Anthroposophy – Theosophy – Rudolf Steiner – racism – antisemitism

1. INTRODUCTION

In January 1902, the Austrian writer and Goethe scholar Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) joined the Theosophical Society. He became the first leader (general secretary) of its German section, which was founded later the same year. In December 1912, the section broke with the international Theosophical movement and joined him in founding the Anthroposophical Society. This organisation remains one of the major new religious movements, with strongholds in German-speaking and Nordic countries and branches all over the world. Anthroposophical ideas and practices are based on Steiner's writings and on his more than 6,000 lectures, which were preserved by diligent stenographers and note-takers. They have been published as part of his collected works, the *Rudolf Steiner Gesamtausgabe*, which includes more than 400 volumes and is now nearing completion.

Steiner claimed to have obtained his spiritual knowledge with mental concentration exercises that, he asserted, provide access to spiritual truths. Scholars

have noted the many similarities between his teachings and earlier teachings in Theosophical and other spiritual traditions, interpreting them as influences from these sources. However, the orthodox Anthroposophical view is that he gained all his knowledge of spiritual realities through meditation (Zander 2012). Steiner provided instructions for such exercises (Sparby 2020) and claimed that others could follow his method, verify his results and build upon them (Hansson 1991: 40–42). Despite this claim, in the more than century-long history of the Anthroposophical movement, no other member has been widely recognised within the movement as having sufficient clairvoyant abilities to add anything of importance to Steiner's teachings. A few other Anthroposophists who claimed such abilities have gained some following, but they were also heavily criticised, and none has convinced more than a small minority within the movement (Hammer and Swartz 2020; Hansson 2022: 292). Many Anthroposophists follow Steiner's lead in describing Anthroposophy as a science ("Geisteswissenschaft", spiritual science). However, due to its reliance on clairvoyant methods and the centrality of reincarnation and spiritual beings in its teachings, it is more reasonable from an external perspective to treat it as a form of religious belief (Zander 2007: 44; Swartz and Hammer 2022: 19n).

One of the most contested parts of Steiner's message is his teachings on human "races". The overlap between his racial claims and traditional white racism has been challenging for the Anthroposophical movement to deal with. For an outsider, it may be puzzling why this should be more difficult than it would be for a Darwinist, for instance, to dissociate from Darwin's claim that women are intellectually inferior to men. This article aims to enhance our understanding of the difficulties Steiner's claims pose for his present-day followers.

The main scholarly source on Anthroposophy is Zander (2007), which includes a section on Steiner's racial ideas. This section focuses on their origins in Theosophical tradition and their connections to Steiner's nonorthodox account of human history, which features alleged lost continents (*ibid.*: 624–637). Martins (2012) provides a more detailed study of the origin and development of Steiner's racial concepts. Steiner's attitudes towards Jewish people and culture have been analysed by Sonnenberg (2003; 2009). Staudenmaier (2012; 2014; 2017) has conducted thorough investigations of the development of German and Italian Anthroposophy after Steiner and provides detailed information on the influence of racist ideas. Similarly, Ebbestad Hansen (2015) has meticulously studied antisemitism in Norwegian Anthroposophy. In the non-scholarly literature, both apologists and critics of Anthroposophy have gathered information that is important for studies of the influence of racial ideas within the movement. An example of the former is van Baarda et al.'s (2009) extensive and well-organised collection of Steiner's pronouncements on race. An example of the latter is Bierl's (2005) well-documented study of the influence of racial ideas in German Anthroposophy. The present article differs from previous research by providing a detailed chronological account of Steiner's claims of alleged racial characteristics of contemporary human populations and investigating the consistency of these claims (Section 2). To this is added a comprehensive account of the post-Steiner impact of

these claims (Section 3) and an analysis of the Anthroposophical discourse on Steiner's racial ideas, concluding with a tentative answer to the question why Steiner's racial ideas have proven so difficult for Anthroposophists to deal with (Section 4). A brief conclusion follows in Section 5.

2. RUDOLF STEINER ON RACE

Some important features of Steiner's teachings should be mentioned to provide background to his pronouncements on race. First, Steiner initially aligned with a Theosophical tradition that referred to "root races" that had succeeded one another in the past. According to Helena Blavatsky, the founder of Theosophy, humanity was destined to progress through seven successive root races, each developing to a higher level than its predecessors. The previous, fourth, root race was said to have inhabited the lost continent Atlantis and was succeeded by the current fifth, "Âryan" root race. However, Blavatsky asserted, only some contemporary humans were "Âryans" belonging to the newest and highest root race. Populations such as the Chinese, "Malayans, Mongolians, Tibetans, Hungarians, Finns, and even the Esquimaux" were described as "remnants" of a previous root race (Blavatsky 1893: 188). The "Tasmanians" belonged to an even lower category of "semi-animal creatures" (ibid.: 206n). She further claimed that "[n]o amount of culture, no generations of training amid civilisation, could raise such human specimens as the Bushmen, the Veddhas of Ceylon, and some African tribes, to the same intellectual level as the Âryans, the Semites, and the Turanians so-called" (ibid.: 439n). Steiner adopted Blavatsky's account of the root races, but he gradually shifted his focus to the various groups of humans currently populating the earth (Zander 2009: 145–146; Martins 2023: 570–571).

Reincarnation is a central component of Steiner's worldview. According to his teachings, an individual can pass through many lives in different races. Furthermore, when Steiner spoke about race souls and folk souls (*Rassenseelen*, *Volksseelen*), he was not speaking metaphorically. He referred to purportedly actual spiritual beings (similar to angels and demons in traditional Christianity) that had important tasks to carry out in world history.

2.1 EARLY THEOSOPHICAL WRITINGS

In 1902, as a new member of the Theosophical movement, Steiner published a series of lectures on mystical aspects of Christianity. In one of these lectures, he discussed evolution, using members of an African people as examples of human beings who are "imperfect" in relation to a "perfect" human such as Goethe, suggesting that they stand in the same relation to Goethe as a fish does to a monkey.

Should the perfect spirit have the same preconditions as the imperfect spirit? Should Goethe have the same conditions as a random Hottentot? Just as a fish does not have the same preconditions as a monkey, the Goethean spirit does not have the same preconditions as a savage. The

spiritual ancestry of the Goethean spirit is not the same as that of the savage spirit. Like the body, the spirit has *come into* existence. The spirit in Goethe has more ancestors than that in the savage. This is how the doctrine of reincarnation should be understood (GA 8:47).

In a lecture delivered in Berlin in 1904, Steiner linked the skin colours of contemporary human beings to alleged root races from the past. He did this in much the same way that Blavatsky had done, claiming that black people were “remnants of the Lemurian race” (the third root race). Members of the so-called yellow race were “remnants of the Atlantean race” (the fourth root race), whereas white people were “representatives of the fifth root race, the post-Atlantean or Aryan race” (Steiner 1904: 5).

In 1904 and 1905, he published a series of sixteen articles in *Lucifer-Gnosis*, a Theosophical journal he edited. The articles described his method for achieving spiritual knowledge. In 1909, he republished them as a book, *How to Know Higher Worlds* (*Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse der höheren Welten?*), which has since been published in at least twenty-four editions. Several pages are devoted to describing how the spiritual disciple achieves a racial consciousness, to which “the materialist thinker with his prejudice” has no access (GA 10:197). Everyone, says Steiner, “receives in the truest sense of the word his work assigned to him from the family soul, folk soul or race soul”, but the uninitiated remain unaware of this (GA 10:198). For the initiated, “the tribe, folk and race souls are revealed in their full powerfulness” (GA 10:200). He further emphasised that there are lower and higher races. Those who belong to a higher race have progressed to it through previous incarnations in lower races:

So, peoples and races are only the various stages of development towards pure humanity. A race or a people stands at a higher level the more perfectly its members express the pure, ideal type of humanity, the more it has worked its way through the physically temporal to the transcendental eternal realm. The development of the human being through ever higher folk and race forms is thus a process of liberation (GA 10:207–208).

Another series of articles, first published between 1904 and 1908, was republished in 1939 as the book *Cosmic Memory* (*Aus der Akasha-Chronik*). A large part of this book consists of detailed accounts of alleged previous “root races”. According to the text, from the fifth subrace of the Atlanteans, “the most gifted part was selected, and it survived the decline of the fourth root race, forming the seed of the fifth race, the Aryan race that has the task of completely developing the power of thinking and everything that belongs to it” (GA 11:41). The Aryans were described as the race “to which the current civilised humanity belongs” (GA 11:44). He stated: “The thinking power planted in human beings could only achieve its full value in the course of

development when it received a new impulse in the fifth root race", i.e. the Aryans (GA 11:43). This book also contains a presentation of his "reverse" theory of evolution, according to which "monkeys are degenerated human beings from a past epoch" (GA 11:97). A similar process, he argued, occurred within humanity. "We can also see the declined descendants of formerly superior human forms among many savage tribes. They did not sink to the level of animals, but only to that of savageness" (GA 11:97).

In a series of twenty lectures delivered in Berlin between 1904 and 1906, Steiner reiterated the same claims about "root races" in the past and the gifted "Aryan" race: "Since the Atlantean race began gradually to disappear, the great Aryan root race has been the ruling one on Earth. When we look at ourselves, we here in Europe belong to the fifth sub-race of this great Aryan root race" (GA 93:205).

2.2 CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LOWER RACES

In a public lecture held in Berlin in 1905 (not part of the series just referred to), Steiner provided more concrete details about the allegedly lower races. He reaffirmed his earlier claim that "humanity leaves lower races behind" (GA 54:143) and specified which races he considered to fall into this category:

This becomes much easier to comprehend when we take a closer look. We will then understand that the Indian population in America, which appears so enigmatic to us with its social structures and peculiar instincts, must be quite different. The African, Ethiopian or negro race is different in yet another way. There, we encounter instincts that are connected to the baser forms of humanity (GA 54:144).

The "Malayan races", he claimed, exhibited "a sleepy nature and an early maturation as far as passions and sexual maturity are concerned" (GA 54:146). His appraisal of Europeans was very different:

The population that is called the Caucasian race constitutes the actual cultural race, which is destined to develop through logical thinking the tools for transforming nature through mere human reason, which can no longer use magical power but must instead rely on mechanical forces (GA 54:144).

In this lecture, he also provided a moral justification for the alleged hierarchy between races. He presented the following alleged puzzle:

In particular, this question arises when we see the differences in how various human races are endowed or gifted. One race stands at the level of what we call the highest culture, while another exists at the most primitive and subordinate level of culture—at least as it appears to us. It

seems strange to us that the human being, whose nature is still fundamentally unified, can appear in such different and also imperfect forms. One often perceives it as an injustice of nature that one person is condemned to live within a deeply inferior human race, while another is elevated to a seemingly perfect race (GA 54:132–133).

His solution was based on the assumption that human souls reincarnate in different races:

Thus, we see that it is not actually the case that one is simply doomed to live in a primitive race while another lives in the highly developed stages of racial existence. Each of us passes through the most varied racial stages, and this passage represents real advancement for the individual soul. He who appears today as a member of the European race has, in earlier times, passed through other human races and will in the future pass through others than our own (GA 54:133).

The hierarchical classification of contemporary human races – as distinct from alleged extinct root races – played a more prominent role in Steiner's racial teachings than in those of his Theosophical forerunners. It is unclear what sources he had for these ideas, but a possible clue can be found in a lecture that he held in Landin (Brandenburg) in 1906. In that lecture, he approvingly quoted a passage from a text by Richard Wagner, in which Wagner asked "where the advantage of the white race can be sought, when we clearly have to place it much above the others", and referred to Arthur de Gobineau (1816–1882) for an answer (GA 97:268). In the same lecture, Steiner called Gobineau "the profound Count Gobineau" (GA 97:263). Gobineau was one of the most influential instigators of the ideology of white supremacy, which is based on the myth of an Aryan race that is superior to all human beings not belonging to it.¹

In a lecture delivered in Stuttgart in 1906, Steiner added a new aspect to his claim about reincarnations into different races:

A soul can be incarnated into a descending race, but if this soul does not make itself evil, it need not be incarnated into such a race again; it will then be born into an ascending race (GA 95:77).

It follows from this that a person (or soul) that belongs to a "descending" race has "made itself evil" in the previous reincarnation. In the same lecture, he claimed that "there will also come a race that is evil by nature, in which all that is evil will be

¹ On other potential sources of Steiner's racial ideas, see Martins (2012: 51, 74–75, 81–82, 94, 103, and 141–143).

present to a higher degree than even in the wildest animals", but he did not provide any further information about that race (GA 95:78).

This lecture was part of a series of fourteen lectures in which both root races and contemporary human races were repeatedly referred to. For instance, "Mongolians" were described as an example of "lower peoples and races" (GA 95:69), while "Indians" were characterised as "descendants of the old Atlanteans that have stagnated in the Atlantean culture" (GA 95:102).

In a public lecture in Berlin in 1906, Steiner applied his racial theories to what he called the "colonisation issue". He asked: "To what extent are uncultivated peoples capable of adopting a new culture? How can a black person, how can a barbaric savage become cultivated? How should one behave towards him?" He claimed that this question could only be answered "if we understand the mysterious influence of the blood and of blood mixture between peoples". Steiner argued that it was crucial to determine whether a people is "in an ascending or a descending line of development, if this or that depends on its blood" (GA 55:42). He illustrated this argument with the fate of Native Americans:

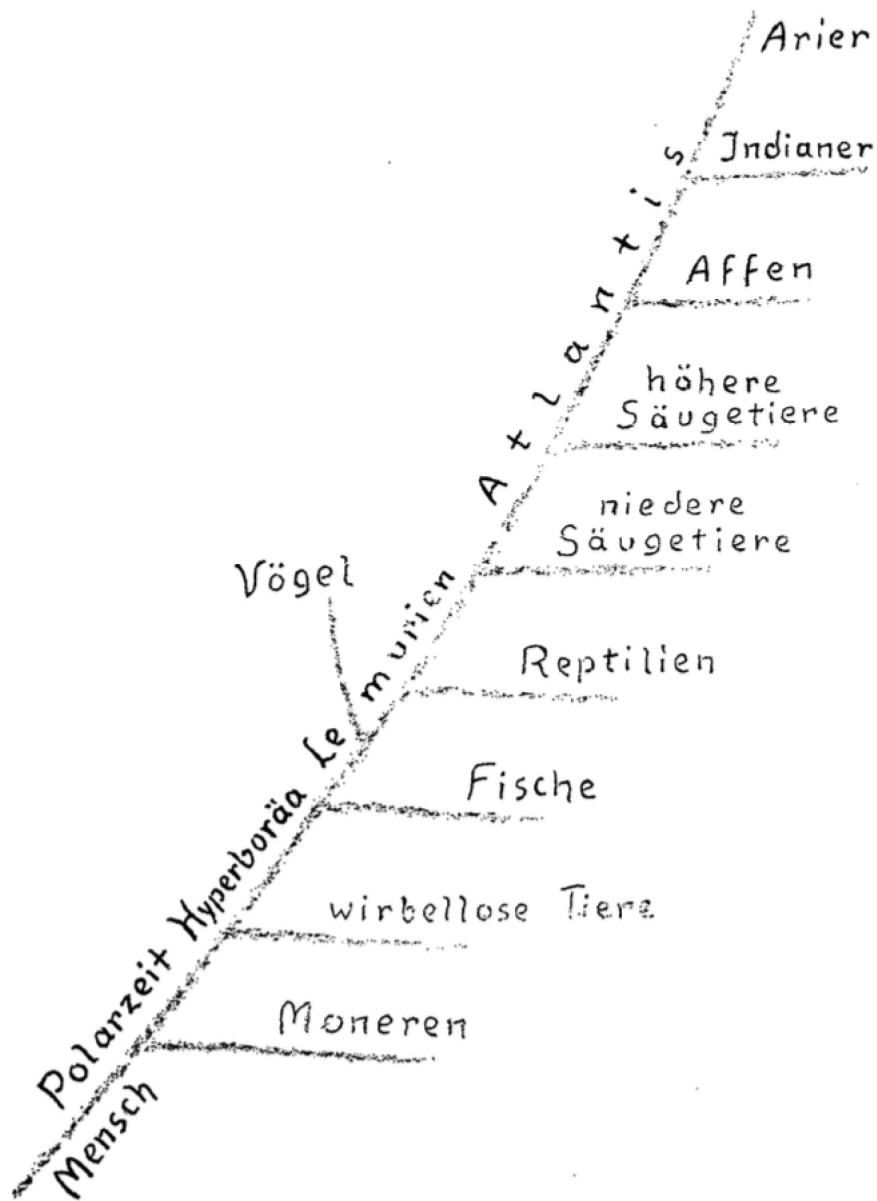
Let us consider a people that has grown out of its environment, on whose blood the environment has left an imprint. If you try to impose a foreign culture upon them, it cannot be done. This is also the reason why certain native peoples had to perish when colonists arrived in certain areas. This question must be judged from this point of view, and for this reason, one can no longer believe that everything can be imposed on everyone. The blood can only be expected to bear what it is capable of enduring (GA 55: 63–64).

In a lecture held in May 1907, he described "the Huns" as "the last remnant of old Atlantean peoples. They, he claimed, are in a state of deep decadence, which manifests itself in a certain process of putrefaction in their astral bodies and etheric bodies (GA 99:59, cf. GA 100:87–88). (The astral and etheric bodies, according to Steiner, are two of the three spiritual bodies that a human being possesses, in addition to the physical body.) In another lecture from the same series, he posited that races would eventually cease to exist in the distant future:

It would be bad to speak of the Theosophy of races as if they were to remain for ever. The concept of race will lose its meaning in the near future, although this means after thousands of years (GA 99:144).

In a lecture held in Munich in June 1907, Steiner added a racial slant to the escalating conflict between the Theosophy of the international Theosophical Society, with its emphasis on Eastern religions, and his own version, which was more oriented towards Christian mysticism. He asserted that Annie Besant, who led the international organisation, provided "Oriental schooling" for "the races in the East

that are dying out", whereas he himself was offering "Western schooling" for "the races of the future" (GA 264:322).



Entwicklung der Menschheit

Fig. 1. A diagram drawn by Rudolf Steiner during a lecture in Basel in 1907. It shows his view of evolution, including Prokaryotes (Moneren), invertebrates (wirbellose Tiere), fishes (Fische), birds (Vögel), reptiles (Reptilien), lower mammals (niedere Säugetiere), higher mammals (höhere Säugetiere), monkeys (Affen), Native Americans (Indianer) and Aryans (Arier). Prokaryotes is an outdated classification that is now divided into two taxa, archaeobacteria and bacteria. (Source: GA 100:247.)

In a lecture later the same month, he asked his audience to compare “one of the most savage, who still eats other human beings, with an average European”. He stated that the former immediately follows his “urges and passions”, whereas the latter “already distinguishes between good and bad” (GA 100:41).² A week later, he told his audience that “the copper-coloured population of America”, the “black negro population” and “the yellow Malayan population” had all converged in locations on the earth “from which no further progress could be made” (GA 100:140–141). Speaking in Basel in November 1907, he reiterated that Native Americans constituted “a primitive native population that lags far, far behind”. In contrast, “the Europeans have risen to a higher cultural level, while the Indians have stagnated and thereby fallen into decadence” (GA 100:244). In a lecture delivered in Cologne in December 1907, he claimed that the “etheric body” was particularly strong “in the black race, in the formation of glands. In the carbon discharge, you find an expression of the characteristics of plants” (GA 101:218).

2.3 RACIAL ASPECTS OF REINCARNATION

In a lecture in held Berlin in May 1908, Steiner returned to the racial aspects of reincarnation, emphasising that the “decadent” races had deteriorated because of the faulty behaviour of some individuals:

Races would neither become decadent nor perish at all if there were no souls that cannot and do not wish to move to a higher type of race. Consider the races that have been preserved from earlier times: They have survived only because of souls that could not move further up. I cannot say anything more today about what it means that the human “coalesces with the race”. Throughout the development of the earth, a whole series of races have come into being and fallen into decadence (GA 102:174).

In “the most extreme case”, when a soul repeatedly fails to reincarnate into a higher race, “such a human will in the end arrive at a stage where he finds no further prospect of acquiring a body for himself.” Such souls “then lose the possibility of incarnating and find no other opportunity” (GA 102:175).

In a series of lectures held in Nuremberg in June 1908, Steiner went into considerable detail about alleged previous races. He also predicted that, in the future, humanity would be divided into only two races, “the good and the bad race” (GA 104:104). Moreover, he elaborated further on the racial aspects of reincarnation. Souls that “had developed themselves” would become “the souls of the bodies that have also moved forward”, whereas “those souls that were stagnated as souls” would reincarnate into a “retarded race” (GA 104:90). He conceded that one might ask if it was not a “terribly tough thought” that “whole masses of people become immature

² Cf. a similar statement in GA 105:60.

and do not develop the ability to flourish, that only a small group becomes able to hand over the seed for the next culture" (GA 104:89). But there was an answer to that:

The race can retard, a people can retard, but the souls advance beyond the individual races (GA 104:89).

In a lecture series in August 1908, he offered more information about what he referred to as degenerate human races:

Such groups of humans, whose skeletal system, so to speak, underwent too much, remained behind as a degenerate human race. They could no longer adapt to the conditions after the Atlantean epoch, and the last remnants of them are the American Indians. They were degenerated. [...] The last remnants of those groups of human beings whose digestive system has hardened now form the black race. And then there are people who became degenerate through the hardening of the nervous system at too early a stage, so that it did not remain soft long enough to become useful as a tool for higher thinking. The last remnant of these form the Malayan race. That is why you find among them certain urges and instincts, certain tendencies towards sensual instincts (GA 105:106–107).

Only the European race, Steiner claimed, had "not stagnated in any form of hardening, but had always been able to develop further" (GA 105:107). He also argued explicitly against claims that members of other races could achieve innovations independently without the aid of Europeans:

Nowadays, it is often claimed that the Japanese have undergone a significant development on the basis of their character traits; that is an illusion. It is not a development based on their own traits. When they won the last war with battleships and cannons invented by European peoples, they made use of a foreign culture. There is no true progress when a people adopt something that originates in the character of another people, but only when something develops out of its own character (GA 105:172).

In a lecture in September 1908, he described "the Mongolic peoples" as "laggards of the old population of Atlantis" (GA 106:132).

2.4 THE BERLIN LECTURE IN 1909

On 3 May 1909, Steiner devoted a whole lecture in Berlin to the differences between "the black, red, yellow and white race" and "how these races are originally connected with certain areas on our Earth" (GA 107:277). He claimed that these races had

migrated from Atlantis to various parts of the Earth and asserted that they varied in the strength of the “I-impulse”:

In those peoples whose I-impulse developed too strongly, it permeated the entire human being from within and imprinted itself on the selfhood, the egoity – these peoples gradually migrated westward and became the population whose last remnants appear as the Indian population of America. [...] However, the colour of the egoity is red, the copper-red or yellowish-brown colour. Therefore, even today, an excessively strong egoity, which stems from an insulted sense of honour, can cause a person, so to speak, to become yellow with anger from within. [...] On the other hand, those peoples who developed their I-character too weakly, who were overly exposed to the effects of the sun, they were like plants: they deposited too many carbonaceous substances under their skin and became black. That is why negroes are black (GA 107:286).³

Both these groups were characterised by passivity:

Look at these colours, beginning with the negro and, at the other end, the yellow-skinned population of Asia. Here we have bodies that enclose very different souls, from the completely passive negro soul that gives itself entirely over to the environment, to the extrinsic state, to the other stages of the passive soul found in the various regions of Asia. [...] Compared to this, we find in Asia populations with passive, submissive natures, in whom passivity is expressed to a higher degree. Consequently, these populations take on a dream-like quality, and the etheric body penetrates deeply into the physical body. This is the fundamental difference between the European and the Asian populations. [...] No people whose I is to some degree either too strong or too weak can become anything special (GA 107: 288–291).

He also attributed the skin colour of black people to what he claimed was their alleged lack of self-consciousness:

The other extreme consisted of those who then said: Oh, the I is worth nothing. The I must completely lose itself, must be entirely absorbed, must let itself be told everything from the outside!—In reality, they have not actually said this, because they do not reflect in that way. But these are the ones who have disowned their I to such a degree that it made them black, since the external forces that come from the sun to the earth simply turned them black (GA 107:292).

³ On the alleged similarity between black people and plants, see also GA 95:129 and 101:218.

In contrast, the “normal human beings” (“Normalmenschen”; GA 107:290), i.e. the members of the white race, were those in whom “the I-feeling is maintained in exactly the right proportion” (GA 107:291). According to Steiner, this was a consequence of their own choice: “Only those who were able to keep the balance with respect to their I, only they could develop themselves into the future” (GA 107:292). The white race, he claimed, consisted of the people who “really wanted to develop their I” (GA 107:294).

In a lecture delivered in December 1909, Steiner presented a very different approach to the topic of race, seemingly negating much of what he had said repeatedly in previous lectures:

Altogether, it would make no sense to speak of a sixth race preparing itself in our time. In our time, there are still remnants of the old Atlantean distinctions, the old Atlantean attachment to group souls, so that we can still speak of lasting effects from the division into races. However, the preparations for the sixth period consist precisely in the elimination of racial characteristics. This is what is important. Therefore, it is necessary that the movement that is called Anthroposophical, which has to prepare for the sixth period, fully affirms this removal of the race character as a determining principle, namely by striving to unite people of all races, of all nations, and in doing so bridging the divisions, the differences, and the chasms that continue to exist between the various groups of human beings (GA 117:151).

One might expect this to mark the beginning of a new, more positive approach towards people of non-European origin in his subsequent lectures. However, no such development took place.

2.5 THE OSLO LECTURES OF 1910

Half a year later, Steiner held a series of eleven lectures in Oslo, all focusing on the tasks of races and peoples. This series stands out from most of his other lecture series in that he himself edited and corrected it for publication (editorial text in GA 121:205). It was published as a book in 1911 and republished in 1918 with a new preface written by Steiner (GA 121:11–13). In the 1918 preface, he did not retract any of its contents, but to the contrary affirmed that the lectures described “a higher spiritual reality of the development of peoples” that traditional science did not see (GA 121:12). These lectures are a key source for Steiner’s views on race and peoples.

He linked human races and peoples to several spiritual entities. Each race, he asserted, was connected with both a human age and a geographical point on the earth’s surface. For instance, a point “inside Africa” was said to emit “all those powers that the human being can receive in his early childhood.” It, he claimed, had a strong influence on “those human beings who are completely dependent on these powers throughout their lives”, namely “what we call the black race” (GA 121:77–78).

Geographical points on other continents were similarly associated with other human ages and races:

...the Asian point is the one that imparts youthful characteristics to human beings, while the most mature characteristics are impressed upon human beings by the corresponding point in the European region. This is simply how the law is. It may be held against us that the European has an advantage over the black and yellow races, but since all human beings pass through the different races in different incarnations, there is no real disadvantage. Admittedly, the truth is often obscured in this regard, but, as you can see, extraordinary knowledge can be attained with the help of occult science (GA 121:78–79).

According to Steiner, Native Americans were disadvantaged by these circumstances, since the geographical point on their continent was connected with “the powers that have much to do with the dying out of humankind” (GA 121:79). This, and not European colonialism, was the true cause of the population decline of indigenous American populations:

The Indian population did not die out because it pleased the Europeans, but because the Indian population had to take on the forces that led to their dying out (GA 121:79).

He also connected the races with planets, for instance Africans with Mercury. (He used the term “Ethiopian race” as a synonym for “black race”.)

Where, for instance, does Mercury intervene? I say Mercury to summarise the abnormal spirits of form associated with Mercury. It intervenes in such a way that it acts in combination with others, namely in the glandular system. It seethes within the glandular system, and then the forces flourish that arise from this excess of Mercury forces, which are active in the Ethiopian race. Everything that gives the Ethiopian race its particular characteristics has its origin in how the Mercury forces boil and bubble in the glandular system of these individuals. This is why they boil out, transforming the general, uniform human figure into the specific characteristics of the Ethiopian race: black skin colour, woolly hair and so on. Thus, this modification of the general human form is brought about by these forces (GA 121:111–112).

The Native American race, according to Steiner, was connected with Saturn, which he claimed resulted in a development that “in a particular way leads to an end – more precisely, to a real end, to dying out” (GA 121:117):

Look at the pictures of old Indians, and you will, so to speak, be able to touch the depicted process with your hands: the decline of a race. In such a race, everything associated with the Saturn development has become present – present in a particular way. But then it has withdrawn into itself and left the human being alone with his hard skeletal system; it has brought him to the point of dying out (GA 121:117).

The Caucasian race, by contrast, was connected with Jupiter spirits, which Steiner claimed act upon the senses. “Thus, the Caucasians become characterised by the senses” (GA 121:115). This, he stated, qualified them for an important task:

The following task is a particular responsibility for the Caucasian race: it has to go from the senses to the spiritual, since it is organised towards the senses (GA 121:115–116).

The Oslo lectures also contain detailed spiritual interpretations of Norse mythology. Steiner asserted that “no other mythology on earth, in its unique structure and specific execution, provides a more significant or clearer picture of world evolution than this Nordic mythology. The image it presents can be regarded as a precursor of the depiction of world development offered by spiritual science” (GA 121:133, cf. GA 121:185). He identified the Norse gods with archangels and assigned important spiritual tasks to them. For instance, Odin had completed the task of bestowing “language upon the souls of the Germanic-Nordic peoples” (GA 121:144). Odin, he continued, was still active, and the “soul of the Germanic-Nordic people” is connected with the “archangel powers of Odin” (GA 121:145). Other Norse gods were also archangels with important tasks to carry out. For example, it was Lodurr who “bestows that which is most intimately connected to race, namely, skin colour and the character of the blood” (GA 121:145).

Steiner told his audience in Oslo that the connection with Norse gods was still alive in the Nordic populations. He spoke of the “folk spirit, which rules throughout the northern regions. The Germanic-Nordic mythological spirit lives in him, although he now lives beneath the surface, and he is more widely present in Europe than one might think” (GA 121:201–202). Therefore, the Nordic peoples were entrusted with important spiritual tasks:

Only a part of a greater whole has been achieved in human and spiritual development during the fifth post-Atlantean cultural epoch. Another part remains to be accomplished. Those who are to contribute most to this achievement are those among the Nordic-Germanic people who feel within themselves that they possess elemental, fresh folk vitality (GA 121:196).

2.6 ON WHITENESS AND A STRUGGLE BETWEEN RACES

Steiner devoted most of a lecture in Berlin in March 1912 to praising the racist theorist Arthur Gobineau. According to Steiner, Gobineau was “a thinker of genius” (GA 61:506). His influential book promoting white supremacy was “filled with ideas that, more than anything else, show us how an advanced person, one who was particularly outstanding in the middle of the nineteenth century, must think.” Steiner further claimed that these ideas “have set the tone and shown the direction for the whole spiritual development of the nineteenth century, yes, one might wish to say, for the whole spiritual development of the modern times” (GA 61:481).

In a lecture in Norrköping, Sweden, in May 1912, Steiner further elaborated on his views on the alleged relationship between souls and races. He claimed that souls that made progress reincarnate into higher races:

But they became better and better, and this led to souls gradually progressing to higher races. Thus, souls that had previously been incarnated in quite subordinate bodies evolved to a higher level and were later able to incarnate into the bodily descendants of the leading population of Europe. The bodily descendants of the leading population in Europe multiplied and became more numerous than before, because the souls multiplied in this direction. Thus, after their improvement, they incarnated into the leading population of Europe. In the course of this development, the bodily form in which the most ancient European population had originally incarnated died out as a physical race. Thus, as the souls abandoned these particular bodily forms, they died out, as it were. This is why the subordinate races had fewer and fewer descendants, while the higher races had more and more. The lowest layers of the European population gradually died out completely (GA 155:93).

This “dying out of the worst parts of the population” filled the whole area with “demonic beings, who constituted the decomposition products, the putrefaction products of what had died out” (GA 155:93–94). Such demons spread a disease:

Gradually, these demonic entities developed as a consequence of the fear instilled by the swarms arriving from Asia. This manifested as the plague of the Middle Ages, as leprosy, as Lepra. [...] Thus, we observe that, in Europe, the levels have died who had to die out since they could not develop upwards. However, residual effects persist in the form of diseases that can still affect people (GA 155:94).

In a lecture delivered in Stuttgart in September 1914, he reaffirmed his previous statements about the special role of the Germanic race:

As Anthroposophists, we know: the I of Europe resides in the German spirit. – That is an objective occult fact (GA 174b:20).

In a lecture given in the same city in 1915, he focused on the spiritual significance of whiteness. “Human beings have their white skin colour because the spirit works within the skin when he seeks to descend to the physical plane” (GA 174b:38). The spirit should penetrate the skin, but “where he stays out, where he acquires a demonic character and does not completely penetrate the flesh, then no white skin colour will appear, since there are atavistic powers that do not achieve full harmony with the flesh” (GA 174b:38–39). He considered a fierce fight between “white humanity” and the rest of humanity to be a necessary part of the process of spiritual progress:

But then the consequence must be that the transition from the fifth cultural epoch to the sixth cultural epoch cannot take place in any other way than a fierce fight between the white humanity and the coloured humanity in a wide variety of areas. And what comes before these fights, which will take place between the white and the coloured humanity, is something that will occupy world history until the conclusion of the big fights between the white and the coloured humanity. (GA 174b:39).

The “fifth cultural epoch” he referred to was the fifth of a series of epochs following the alleged sinking of the Atlantic. This epoch was said to have begun in 1413 AD and would end in 3573 AD. In this lecture, he also repeated his claim from 1908 (Section 2.3) that Eastern Asian populations were incapable of innovation. “In the East, they will not have the powers to productively bring forth a spiritual life of their own, but only the capacity to assimilate what has been brought forth by others” (GA 174b:40). He used a sexual metaphor to convey this message: “like a woman, the East will have to let itself be inseminated by the manly West” (GA 174b:43).

2.7 FOLK SPIRITS AND WORLD POLITICS

In October 1917, half a year after the US entered World War I and declared war against Germany, Steiner added a new aspect to his racial account of the inhabitants of America. He claimed that the Europeans who had migrated to America would “gradually acquire features reminiscent of the old Indians”:

The Europeans in America have, outwardly and physically, become “Indianised.” If the soul were now to follow this physical process, as it did in earlier times, this would lead to a revival of Indian culture – only expressed in European terms. That is somewhat paradoxical, but it is nevertheless so (GA 177:227).

He repeated this in a lecture in April 1919, asserting that Americans of European origin would “come to have hands like those of Indians, similar to the type that the old Indians had” (GA 190:197).

In lectures delivered to Waldorf teachers in August 1919, he instructed them to teach about “the reciprocal relationships between tribes, inhabitants of India, the Chinese, the Americans, their peculiarities and so on.” Such teaching was “particularly necessary in the present epoch” (GA 295:19). He also outlined connections between nationality and various physical elements:

The Italian folk soul has a particular affinity with the air, the French a particular connection with everything liquid, the English-American, namely the English, a connection with solids, the American even with what lies beneath the Earth, namely terrestrial magnetism and electricity. Then the Russian one with light, but with the kind of light that is reflected off the Earth and the plants. The German with heat, which you will soon find to have a dual character, namely internal and external, blood heat and atmospheric heat (GA 295:55).

In a lecture series in 1920, he referred his listeners to his published Oslo lectures from 1910, emphasising their message that in order to understand “these connections of races and peoples” one must “step up into worlds above the physical one” (GA 199:31). He claimed that human beings have to “interpret their affinity with races and peoples in such a way that they recognise a spiritual, supernatural entity as leader” (GA 199:32). He also warned against the idea of unity among all races:

The characteristic sign of the present times is the belief that when a society adopts a foolish slogan as a general program – universal unity among all races, nations, colours and so on – then this means that something has been achieved. In this way, nothing has been achieved except throwing sand in the eyes of humanity. Something will only be done when you look at the differences and recognise what truly exists in the world (GA 199:124).

In a lecture he held on 12 December 1920, he supplemented his previous statements about Native Americans. He emphasised that this was only an addition, not a correction:

This should by no means be understood as a correction of what was previously stated, which was fully correct, but concerns a particular group of people. Rather, what follows is said as a complementary addition. [...] A population as wild as the Indian population of America is indeed wild in terms of what has been called civilisation in the European world in the last few centuries, but at times it harbours

something connected with other soul powers that do not belong to the intellect, and this is something that so-called civilised humanity might well wish to recover. Most importantly, the Indian population possessed a perspective on the spiritual powers at work in the world that does in fact, upon close examination, contain something impressive. This population revered a great spirit. To be sure, they were already in a decadent state at the time of the conquest, but these decadent manifestations point back to the worship of a great spirit that permeates everything, imbues everything and has his subordinate powers in the particular elemental spirits (GA 202:124–125).

In the same lecture, he stated that some Japanese individuals had been European Christians in previous lives, which had resulted in “a certain nuancing of the decadent Asianness” (GA 202:127). However, two days later, he said in another lecture that these Japanese now “take up what has been preserved in the East from the old oriental traditions and then ended up in decadence” (GA 202:150).

In the lecture on 12 December, he also linked his racial ideas to the politics of the day. He criticised “the proclamations of Wilsonianism,” referring to American President Woodrow Wilson’s famous Fourteen Points. These included withdrawals from occupied territories, reductions in national armaments, and the formation of the League of Nations. Steiner described Wilson’s proposals as directed against “the self-governance of blood-related peoples.” He argued that Europe’s acceptance of Wilson’s ideas expressed a “racial opposition to the self-assertion of the spiritual-soulish element” (GA 202:133; cf. GA 24:339–385).

In the final two months of 1921, Steiner revisited Oslo to lecture on “the future spiritual tasks of Norway and Sweden.” He reminded the audience of his earlier talks in the same city in 1910, stating that they should “serve as a true guide against the forces steering towards confusion” (GA 209:14). His new lectures in Oslo were devoted to the character of Norwegians and Swedes. The former, in particular, had, according to Steiner, been “gifted with particularly abilities”, including an “unconscious wisdom of nature” that they were to share with other souls after their death (GA 209:61).

In a lecture delivered in August 1922, Steiner stated that “we must regard even the negro as a human being, and in him the human form is realised in a completely different way than in us, for example” (GA 305:100).

In a series of lectures delivered at the Anthroposophical headquarters in Dornach, Switzerland, in 1922 and 1923, he added new claims to his previous teachings on races. He now introduced a distinction within the white race between blonde and dark-haired persons:

But over time, blonderness is lost, because humankind is weakened. In the end, there may only be brown- and black-haired people, and if they receive no help, they will also remain stupid. This is because an increase

in physical strength is accompanied by a decrease in soul strength. And if the blonde-haired people were to die out, all of humankind on Earth would face the danger of becoming stupid. [...] It is, in fact, the case that the more the blonde races die out, the more the instinctive wisdom of humanity dies out. People become more stupid (GA 348:102–103).

He also asserted that there were large differences in the sense of smell between the human races. Europeans, he claimed, did not rely much on that sense:

On the other hand, wild tribes in Africa, for example, pick up scents just as a dog catches the scent of an enemy that is still far away. They pick up the scent of this enemy and hurry up. Thus, this form of intelligence, which we find developed to such a high degree in dogs also exists to a certain extent among wild tribes, so that a savage in Africa, in certain tribes, knows long before he sees the enemy that the enemy is there – because he can distinguish him from others by scent. [...] Thus, we can say: the more cultivated, civilised, a person is, the more the importance of his sense of smell declines. And we can use the sense of smell in a small study of whether we have an uncivilised kind among us – like the dog, which belongs to an uncivilised kind – or a more civilised one (GA 348:107–108).

Furthermore, he claimed that the mixing of races would result in the creation of syphilis:

The syphilitic diseases have arisen when persons from widely distant races have mixed sexually with each other. [...] You can see from this that the syphilitic contagium must first emerge in some place where remotely opposite blood comes together. Naturally, the poison then continues to reproduce. But it was originally created through large intermixing among various peoples. It would probably be interesting to also examine statistics on cases of this disease, where in certain areas of Europe all kinds of exotic people are used, and it cannot always be prevented that various sexual excesses take place today as well (GA 348: 328–329).

He also claimed that it was dangerous for pregnant white women to read “negro novels”:

Yes, for my part, I am convinced that there is an increase in the number of negro novels, and if we give these negro novels to pregnant women to read in the first part of their pregnancy, namely when they today can often develop such cravings – we give these negro novels to the pregnant women to read, then there is no need to ensure that negroes come to

Europe to produce mulattos. A considerable number of children will be born in Europe through the purely mental act of reading of negro novels – children who are entirely grey, have mulatto-like hair and look like mulattos! (GA 348:189)

To avoid this alleged danger, pregnant women should instead read novels deemed suitable for them. They would then, he claimed, give birth to “beautiful human beings” (GA 348:189).

When responding to an audience question after a lecture held in February 1923, Steiner described French as a language that was already dead but “continued to be spoken as a corpse”. He argued that speaking French was dangerous:

The soul will quite surely be corrupted by using the French language. It gains nothing except the possibility to use a certain phraseology. This corruption will also spread to other languages among those who speak French with enthusiasm. It is indeed the case that the French themselves are now destroying what has sustained their cadaverous language, namely their blood (GA 300b:282).

He also criticised the French for the “dreadful deed” of allowing black people into Europe:

The terrible act of cultural brutality involved in spreading black people in Europe is a dreadful deed that the French inflict upon others. But this will have even more severe consequences for France itself. It will have incredibly powerful effects on the blood, on the race. This will greatly increase French decadence. The French people will decline as a race (GA 300b:282).

This referred to the soldiers of African origin who were part of the French troops participating in the then ongoing Allied occupation of the Rhineland. This occupation had been imposed by the Treaty of Versailles. At the time, the presence of black soldiers in Germany was subject to extensive racist campaigns (Collar 2017; cf. Lunn 1999).

2.8 THE IMPORTANCE OF SKIN COLOUR

In March 1923, Steiner held a lecture in Dornach on “Colour and Human Races,” in which he repeated and confirmed much of what he had said earlier on human races while also introducing some new aspects. This time, he placed even greater emphasis on skin colour than in his previous presentations. He stated that one can “only understand everything spiritual in the correct sense if one first devotes oneself to how the spiritual in the human being acts specifically through the colour of the skin” (GA 349:52).

On the one hand, we have the black race, which is mostly earthly. When it moves westward, it dies out. We have the yellow race, which stands in the middle between Earth and the universe. When it moves eastward, it becomes brown, positions itself too close to the universe, dies out. The white race is the race of the future, the race that is spiritually creative (GA 349:67).

White people were described as “those who develop humanness within themselves” (GA 349:62). He now also asserted, well in line with his earlier identification of white people as “normal human beings” (Section 2.4), that they have fewer racial characteristics than members of other races:

Then you can see that due to their overall constitution, Europeans no longer develop their racial characteristics. Instead, they are developing qualities of the soul and the spirit. That is why they are able to penetrate all other parts of the world (GA 349:64).

The suitability of Europeans to “penetrate” all parts of the world stood in stark contrast to his previous condemnation of black presence in Europe, a sentiment he now reiterated:

The negro race does not belong to Europe, and of course it is nothing but mischief that it now plays such a large role in Europe (GA 349:53).

As in previous lectures, he maintained that Native Americans were black people who had migrated to the West but were unable to survive there:

Therefore, they die out like the Indians in the West—once again a declining race, dying out due to their own nature, which receives too little light and warmth, and perishes from earthliness (GA 349:61).

Similarly, “Malayans” were members of the yellow race who had migrated to the East but were unable to adapt to their new environment:

It is not in their nature to absorb the amount of heat that they are now exposed to as Malaysians. The consequence of this is that they begin to become useless human beings, that they begin to become people whose bodies are torn apart, whose bodies die. That is indeed the situation for the Malayan population. They are dying from the sun. They are dying from the Easternness. We can say: While those who are yellow, the Mongolians, are still human beings in their full vigour, the Malaysians are already a dying race. They are dying out (GA 349:61).

He repeated his earlier claim that Japanese people are incapable of innovation. "To think out something themselves, that is something the Japanese will not do" (GA 349:59). He also generalised this assertion to include all Asians:

As I have said, inventing things on their own, something that arises from experience of the outer world, is something Asians are incapable of. [...] Thus, Asians lack the independent thinking that Europeans have developed in their interaction with the environment (GA 349:59).

As usual, black people fared poorly in Steiner's descriptions of human races. He repeated his claim from earlier lectures that "the negro has a strong instinctual life" (GA 349:55). To this, he now added: "The black person is an egoist" (GA 349:56). Even the skeletons of black people were inferior to those belonging to the white race.

Consider such a black person. He develops in particular the instinctual life—that is, what boils within. This gives rise to a great deal of ash. This ash settles in the bones. As a result, he becomes more developed in the bones than a member of the white race, who makes greater use of what he has inside for the blood. Therefore, his bones will be more finely shaped. Thus, the negro has coarse bones; the European, more finely shaped ones (GA 349:60).

Steiner also expressed his negative views on black people in a lecture held in March 1924. He referred to a biography of Franz Schubert that described the composer's outward appearance as "about the way a negro would have looked." Steiner objected to this description, stating: "That is out of the question. He even had a very sympathetic face!" (GA 235:123).

In a lecture series in 1924 he talked extensively about Jews and their previous spiritual tasks as a people. Regarding their future, he had the following to say:

Everything that the Jews have done can now be done in a conscious manner, for instance, by all human beings. Therefore, the Jews could in fact do nothing better than to be absorbed into the rest of humanity, to mix with the rest of humanity, so that Jewry as a people would simply come to an end (GA 353:202).

Here Steiner advocated for an end to Jewishness and the Jewish people through assimilation. This must, of course, be clearly distinguished from advocacy for extermination (Sonnenberg 2003).

2.9 SUMMARY

We can now summarise what Steiner wrote and said about races at different times throughout his career. He consistently maintained that there are lower and higher human races (1902, 1904, 1905, 1906, 1907, 1908, 1909, 1910, 1915, 1917, 1920, 1922, 1923), and he praised the influential racist author Arthur Gobineau as a genius (1906, 1912). He also consistently claimed that virtuous souls progress into higher races, ultimately into that of “the leading population of Europe” (1908, 1909, 1912). Conversely, he argued that evil souls could be reincarnated into lower races (1906, 1908). Since souls can reincarnate into higher races, the inferior position of the lower races did not constitute an injustice (1905, 1908, 1910).

Steiner warned against sexual intercourse between individuals of different races, claiming that such relations were the source of syphilis (1923). He also claimed that races would eventually cease to exist in the distant future, a few thousand years from now (1907).

According to Steiner, black people are remnants of the third root race (1904). While he acknowledged that they are humans, he claimed that in them the human form is “realised in a completely different way than in us” (1922). He described them as a degenerate race, inferior to white people (1902, 1905, 1908). He likened them to plants in important respects, in particular in that they “deposited too much of carbonaceous substances under their skin and became black” (1906, 1907, 1909). He also offered two other explanations for black skin, namely that it resulted from lack of self-consciousness (1909) and from a “boiling” glandular system (1910). He further characterised black people as having a “hardened” metabolic system (1908) and too coarse bones due to the deposition of ash (1923). He also claimed that some black people have an enhanced sense of smell, like dogs (1922).

Steiner also asserted that black people have a strong instinctual life (1905, 1923). He described them as uncivilised, barbaric savages (1906, 1922) with a “completely passive” soul (1909). He claimed that they possess mental features akin to children (1910). He asserted that they have a weak egoity (1909) but also described them as egoists (1923). He maintained that black people are incapable of progress and cannot become anything special (1907, 1909). He further argued that they should not be in Europe (1923) and specifically warned that pregnant white women might give birth to “mulatto” children instead of “beautiful human beings” if they read “negro novels” (1922).

Steiner described Asian peoples as remnants of the fourth, Atlantean root race (1904, 1908). He classified them as belonging to the “lower” races, in a state of degeneration and “deep decadence”, largely due to the hardening of their nervous system (1906, 1907, 1908). He likened them to adolescents (1910), further claiming that they were inclined towards sensual instincts and early sexual maturity (1905, 1908). He further characterised them as possessing a “passive soul” and being sleepy, dreamish and submissive (1905, 1909). According to Steiner, they lack the capacity for invention, innovation and independent thinking (1908, 1915, 1923). He described

them as “useless human beings” who can make no further progress (1907, 1923) and whose race is dying out (1907, 1923).

Native Americans were described by Steiner as “descendants of the old Atlanteans” (1906) with a too strong egoity (1909). He asserted that they have stagnated and are a declining, degenerate and decadent race that lags far behind (1906, 1907, 1908, 1923). However, he maintained that despite their decadence, they have retained some valuable soul powers from the past, which do not belong to the intellect (1920). He claimed that they are incapable of progress and cannot become anything special (1907, 1909). He also argued that their race is destined to die out (1906, 1910, 1923).

According to Steiner, white people belong to the fifth and, as-yet, highest root race (1904). He described them as “normal human beings”, possessing fewer racial characteristics than members of other races (1909, 1923). He claimed that they have white skin for a spiritual reason, namely, that “the spirit acts in the skin when he wants to descend to the physical level” (1915). White people, he asserted, have the characteristics of humans in mature age (1910). Their organisation is oriented towards the senses (1910), and their egoity is maintained in precisely the right proportion (1909). Steiner described them as spiritually creative (1923), the intellectually most gifted race (1908) and culturally superior to other races (1907). He further asserted that they are the actual cultural race, destined to develop logical thinking (1905). Unlike other races, white people, he stated, can live in all parts of the world (1923), although Europeans living in America were said to acquire some of the physical features of Native Americans (1917, 1919). White people, said Steiner, are the only race capable of true development (1908, 1909, 1923), and he referred to them as the race of the future (1909, 1923).

As this summary demonstrates, Steiner’s views on race were remarkably consistent over time. This applies in particular to his ascriptions of mental qualities to different races. It also becomes clear from this summary that Steiner’s consistently held views on race largely coincide with those commonly promoted by white racists.

3. ANTHROPOLOGY AND RACISM AFTER STEINER

Anthroposophy has grown into a movement with branches all over the world. However, there is relatively little independent scholarly literature on its development and little systematic knowledge about the impact of Steiner’s racial ideas within the movement he founded. Section 3.1 provides evidence of its impact in Sweden, which has not previously been reported in the international literature. Sections 3.2–3.5 briefly summarise previous research on the role of racial ideas in German, Dutch, Norwegian and Italian Anthroposophy.

3.1 SWEDEN

Ample evidence of the importance that Swedish Anthroposophists have attached to Steiner’s ideas on races can be found in the journal *Antropos*, which was published from 1959 to 2001. It was the leading Anthroposophical journal in the country.

In 1959, an article by the journal's editor, Hans Mändl, outlined the alleged characteristics of human races according to "the results of Rudolf Steiner's research". His descriptions closely follow Steiner's account in the Oslo lectures (Section 2.5). For instance, the white race was described as possessing "mature manliness", in contrast to "the Indian race, which is dying out". He claimed that "black people are happy in a childish way" and that "the negro retains the same childish character throughout his entire life". He also maintained that "negroes have made the Americans childish", as could be seen from how white people "spend hours in the evenings moving to the negro rhythms of negro music." Mändl insisted, however, that these assertions were not derogatory: "If you learn to understand the childish nature of the black person, then you will never again rebuke her or feel contempt for her" (Mändl 1959).

In 1960, Mändl published an article entirely devoted to the characteristics of black people according to "Rudolf Steiner's magnificent explanation of the race phenomenon". Once again, he reiterated Steiner's idea that different human races correspond to different stages of human development. White people, he claimed, represent "the epoch of mature manhood", whereas black people possess childlike traits that are "expressed in strong urges and instincts." He also repeated Steiner's answer to the question, "Why are the negroes black?" and referred to Steiner's remark about "the strangely sly gaze of the negroes" (cf. GA 349:55). Again, Mändl argued that treating black people like children was not condescending: "But do we, in other cases, consider childhood to be a state of retardation?" (Mändl 1960).

In 1962, *Antropos* published a short excerpt from one of Steiner's Oslo lectures from 1910, where he compared the Indian and the Chinese peoples, distinguishing between "the Indian people, which is capable of development within certain limits, and the Chinese people, which cuts itself off and remains rigid, repeating what was present in the old Atlantean time" (Steiner 1962; GA 121:176).

An anonymous article in 1962, almost certainly written by Mändl, recounted Steiner's account of connections between human races and different planets: "The white race has the character of Jupiter, which represents the mature age to which rich experience has bestowed inner strength and harmony". The black race, according to the article, was connected with Mercury, which, the argument goes, explains the features of a black person, "his mind – his language with the use of only infinitives, his subordination as a servant" (Mändl 1962).

In 1964, *Antropos* published a text by the Dutch Anthroposophist Max Stibbe, who attempted to explain political developments in Asia with the help of Steiner's racial teachings. Stibbe claimed that "the yellow race" has "an intelligence that can be compared to the intellectual capacity of a young person at the age of puberty" (Stibbe 1964). This, he said, was indispensable knowledge for understanding people of this race:

Rudolf Steiner shows that you can only understand the yellow race if you know that in spiritual terms it can be compared to young people in puberty. Furthermore, these people are extremely sly, and this slyness is

expressed in the half-closed eyes. Slyness, combined with dauntless cruelty – that is something to fear in a war (Stibbe 1964).

In the same article, Stibbe suggested that further development of Steiner's "new science" could lead to "a new, loving, race doctrine" that seeks "understanding of the differences" (ibid.).

An anonymous article in 1966, almost certainly written by Mändl, discussed the "Nordic race" and how its properties are connected to the blood. He quoted one of Steiner's Oslo lectures from 1921: "If the particular gifts of the Nordic race are brought to light, then it may be precisely here in this secluded corner of Europe that an insight may mature that can fertilise all other parts of Europe". (Translated from Mändl's rather free Swedish translation, cf. GA 209:18–19.) Mändl also claimed that the Nordic peoples are particularly special: "for millennia in times past, they had a form of 'immaculate conception' (reproduction took place during states of sleep and dreaming)", and they "have comparatively very little mixed blood" (Mändl 1966).

In 1968, *Antropos* published an excerpt from a lecture delivered by Steiner in Stuttgart in 1915 (see Section 2.6): "[W]here the spirit so far will only act as a spirit, where it, in a sense, must halt in its development, where it is held back, where it takes on a demonic character and does not completely penetrate the body, the white skin colour does not appear" (translated from the free Swedish translation published in *Antropos*, cf. GA 174b:38.). This excerpt also included the passage in which Steiner stated that "the transition from the fifth cultural epoch to the sixth cultural epoch cannot take place in any other way than a fierce fight between the white humanity and the coloured humanity in a wide variety of areas" (cf. GA 174b:39). This was followed by a text by Mändl, in which he reaffirmed Steiner's view that "the coloured races represent different earlier phases in the development of humanity as a whole and preserve these for the future, when they will again come to the fore – albeit in a transformed form." In the same text, he reiterated Steiner's claim that differences between human races are not unjust, since every human being passes through different races over the course of successive reincarnations. He also emphasised that there is no reason to "look down on the coloured races with arrogance. One does not despise old people or children simply because they are not at the current peak of human development" (Mändl 1968).

In 1968, *Antropos* also published a two-part article by the Dutch anthroposophist L.F.C. Mees on the relationship between white and black people (Mees 1968a; 1968b). Mees wrote the article after having spent two months in South Africa. He claimed that his experiences there confirmed Steiner's view that black people are like children. According to Mees, "for the most part, negroes really do halt in their development at the age of twelve, although there are of course exceptions" (Mees 1968a: 246). He characterised black people as contented, suggesting that "perhaps their contentedness has something to do precisely with the fact that they are children, since among us the same trait is often found in children from poor families." However, he had also found "certain negro problems that are connected with the

difficulties of adapting to an organised society" (ibid.: 244). Mees cautiously defended apartheid, arguing that "many who at any cost want to place negroes and white people on an equal footing assume that the negroes should be brought into intensive contact with our present-day culture as soon as possible." In his view, it would be more reasonable for "the negroes of Africa" to "withdraw to their own community," where they could live a "natural life that they have been connected with for thousands of years" (ibid.: 243–244, cf. Mees 1968b: 276).

An anonymous text in *Antropos* in 1969, almost certainly written by Mändl, focused on the origins of the white race. It claimed that white people are descendants of "original Semites" (also called "pre-Aryans"), who "at that time represented what was truly human in the human being, namely the spark of light of the thinking I." A spiritual being named Manu led "the kernel of the best of the original Semites" to Middle Asia. "But everywhere along the way he left behind less useful parts of the populations, and he was then finally able to form the beginnings of *Aryan* humanity from the elite" (Mändl 1969).

After Mändl's death in 1972, mentions of race became less frequent in *Antropos*. However, there were two exceptions. In 1978, *Antropos* published a large part of the lecture by Steiner in Stuttgart in 1915 that the journal had published a shorter excerpt from in 1968. This means that Steiner's proclamation of a necessary "fierce fight between the white humanity and the coloured humanity in a wide variety of areas" was published a second time by *Antropos*, now under a new editor (Steiner 1978: 11, cf. GA 174b:39).

The other exception is a 1983 article by Swedish Anthroposophist and Waldorf teacher Hans Möller (1925–2020), where he endorsed Steiner's view that black people are like children. He found it "distressing to observe how American men once, out of ruthlessness, enchained negroes – human beings who were on a child's level of development" (Möller 1983: 25).

Steiner's racial ideas were also referred to in publications by the Swedish association for Anthroposophical medicine.⁴ An article in their journal from 1981 described "the impulsive, open manner of the African, the round, almost childlike facial features", and claimed that "the human being of the East" is "introverted, unearthly and light-limbed. The skin is porcelain-like, almost transparent, and the gaze bears witness to perseverance, patience and a serene inner life" (Lüthi 1981). In a book published by the same organisation in 1985, it was asserted that racial aspects should influence the choice of food. It claimed that rice "supports the phlegmatic temperament and an introverted, contemplative outlook on life. For the formation of the Western consciousness, rice does not provide the same foundation as our own cereals" (Olsson 1985). That same year, the organisation also published a booklet that included the following claim:

⁴ Föreningen för antroposofisk läkekonst, FALK.

A high fertility is characteristic of the Asian population, and family ties are strong. A certain phlegmatic temperament is typical of them. The Eastern peoples, particularly the Indian ones, progress through the development of consciousness very slowly (Renzenbrink 1985: 11).

This booklet was republished in a revised version in 1998. The passage was retained, but it was expressed somewhat differently:

A high fertility is characteristic of the Asian population, and family ties are strong. A certain phlegmatic temperament is typical of the Eastern peoples, among whom in particular the Indian ones progress through the development of consciousness very slowly (Renzenbrink 1998: 16).

The change in language shows that the reason why this racial claim was retained in the new edition cannot have been lack of attention.

In summary, Steiner's views on races, in particular his claim that black people are like children, were widely quoted and expanded upon in Swedish Anthroposophy from the 1950s until the 1980s. In the 1980s, these racial claims became the subject of public criticism (Hansson 1988). Following this criticism, racial ideas seem to have disappeared from publicly available Anthroposophical texts published in Sweden, with the exception of the text from 1998 mentioned above.

3.2 GERMANY

After the Nazi regime took power in Germany 1933, the Anthroposophical movement took various measures to ensure that it could continue its activities under the new regime. For many within the movement, this was well in line with their own political views. Hans Büchenbacher, who had to resign from the board of the German Anthroposophical association in 1935 due to his father's Jewish origin, wrote in his autobiography that about "two thirds of the members had a positive view of Nazism" (Martins 2012: 138). On June 6, 1933, the Danish newspaper *Ekstrabladet* published an interview with Guenther Wachsmuth, one of the three members of the board of the international General Anthroposophical Society. When asked how the new German government treated Anthroposophy, he answered that Anthroposophists "have absolutely nothing to complain about. We are treated most considerately and have full freedom to work for our doctrine." In response to a question about Anthroposophists' views on the Nazi movement, he said that "it should not be a secret that we look with sympathy on what is happening in Germany. [...] The brave, courageous way in which the leaders of the new Germany have tackled the problems can, in my view, only give rise to admiration. Something good will surely come out of it" (Anon. 1933). This statement was made at a time when full-scale Nazi persecution of Jews and political enemies was already ongoing. (Wachsmuth remained a member of the board of the international Anthroposophical Society until his death in 1963.)

Attitudes to Anthroposophy differed within the Nazi regime. On November 15, 1935, the Gestapo banned the German Anthroposophical Society. Two days later, Wachsmuth and his two colleagues on the board of the General Anthroposophical Society, Albert Steffen and Marie Steiner, sent a letter to Hitler requesting that the decision be overturned. In the letter, they highlighted Steiner's "Aryan origins" and assured the regime that the Anthroposophical Society "has never had any connections or any contacts of any kind with any Freemasonic, Jewish, or pacifist circles" (Staudenmaier 2014: 112). Their request was not granted, but through skilful manoeuvring in the Nazi hierarchy, German Anthroposophists were able to continue their activities by operating through other organisations. They even established a new organisation for the study of Steiner's spiritual science, which explicitly excluded Jews and Freemasons and allowed Gestapo oversight (ibid.: 115–116). However, after their protector Rudolf Heß fled to Scotland in May 1941, the situation for Anthroposophists deteriorated. Most of their activities were suspended, but through contacts within the SS they were able to continue practicing biodynamic farming, an Anthroposophical type of agriculture. Biodynamic farming was conducted in several concentration camps, led by Anthroposophists and using prisoners as a severely mistreated, enslaved workforce. These practices continued until the camps were liberated in 1945 (Staudenmaier 2013; Kurlander 2017: 146–150, 239–240 and 249–250).

In most Anthroposophical accounts of the movement's history, much weight is placed on the prohibition of the Anthroposophical Society in 1935, and neither the extensive efforts by leading Anthroposophists to appease the regime nor the practice of biodynamic farming with slave labour are mentioned (Knust 2022). However, although German Anthroposophists faced a difficult and uncertain situation during the Nazi period, their struggle was not one of resistance against the regime (others did that) but was instead a fight for concessions that would allow them to continue their activities under the new political circumstances. After the war, neither German Anthroposophy nor the international Anthroposophical Society appears to have taken steps to acknowledge this dark history from the Nazi period or express regret for it.

Steiner's racial ideas have continued to be part of the teachings of German Anthroposophy. Objections have mostly come from outside the movement. In 1992, Jutta Ditfurth criticised Anthroposophy in her book *Feuer in die Herzen*, which brought Steiner's racial teachings to light (Ditfurth 1992). Her criticism was largely based on her experiences with Anthroposophical participation in the formation of the Green Party in 1980. Since then, numerous books and journal articles that criticise Anthroposophy for its racial teachings have been published in Germany, often focusing on their influence in Waldorf schools. One example is the disclosure that a literature list for Waldorf teachers from 1998 included several books that present views on human races that align with Steiner's views; black people, for instance, are described as childlike, etc. The Federal Department for Media Harmful to Young

Persons⁵ planned to include one of these books on its list of media that are dangerous for youth, but the publisher avoided this by withdrawing the book (Bierl 2005: 19–21). In 2007, the publishers of Steiner's collected works narrowly avoided similar indexing of two volumes by agreeing to issue new editions with comments addressing the racist passages.⁶ In 2021, a website for history and geography teachers in Waldorf schools still recommended materials describing the peoples of different continents as having different mental characteristics, although the word "race" was no longer used (Martins 2023: 579–583).

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2021, many German Anthroposophists took part in demonstrations against vaccinations and other public measures for infection prevention and control. These protests were dominated by right-wing extremists and often included expressions of antisemitism. A new political party, *die Basis*, was formed in 2020, promoting political views that combine Anthroposophical and right-wing extremist views. The Anthroposophical presence in these contexts received extensive media coverage, which led to renewed attention to the racial ideas within Anthroposophy (Frei and Nachtwey 2021).

3.3 THE NETHERLANDS

Max Stibbe (1898–1973), one of the pioneers of Waldorf education in the Netherlands, had a particular interest in Steiner's racial ideas. He wrote several articles defending Steiner's views on black people and even went so far as to defend apartheid. His international influence is evident from the republication of some of his texts in the Swedish journal *Antropos*, as recounted in Section 3.1. In the 1930s, Stibbe introduced teaching on race and peoples into geography classes for the seventh and eighth grades of Dutch Waldorf schools. His instructions, which included the teaching of Steiner's racial stereotypes, were in general use in Waldorf schools well into the 1990s.

Criticism of this practice reached the front pages in 1995 when Dutch media reported extensively on Angelique Oprinsen, a woman who reacted strongly when her daughter brought home an exercise book from her Waldorf school containing characterisations of different human races. For instance, black people were described as childlike, while "yellow" Asians were said to have a permanent smile that hides their emotions. When Oprinsen did not get any sensible answers from the school, she took her concerns to the press. This led to a media storm and significant turmoil within the Dutch Anthroposophical Society. Its chair was forced to resign after failing to provide credible responses to questions from reporters. In 1996, a committee of Anthroposophists was tasked with evaluating the accusations of racism against Steiner. In a report published two years later, the commission concluded that Steiner's Anthroposophy "contains no race doctrine", although they conceded that some

⁵ At the time, its name was Bundesprüfstelle für jugendgefährdende Schriften. It is now called the Bundeszentrale für Kinder- und Jugendmedienschutz.

⁶ GA 107 and 121.

passages in his texts would likely be illegal under Dutch law if publicly expressed in the 1990s (Bierl 2005: 113–114; van Baarda et al. 2009: 15 and 301–303).

3.4 NORWAY

The role of Anthroposophy in Norwegian racism has been thoroughly investigated by Jan-Erik Ebbestad Hansen (2015), whose findings are briefly summarised here.

Steiner's lecture series in Oslo in 1910 and 1921 (Sections 2.5 and 2.7) had a profound influence on the direction of Norwegian Anthroposophical activities. As we saw above, both lecture series assigned important roles to the "Aryan" race, and in 1921 Steiner specifically addressed the important "future spiritual tasks of Norway and Sweden". Several of his Norwegian followers went on to become prominent proponents of racist ideologies in Norway. Ingeborg Møller (1878–1964), who served as Steiner's assistant when he visited Norway, was a leading antisemitic propagandist and an admirer of Vidkun Quisling in the 1930s. Marta Steinsvik (1877–1950) and Helga Geelmuyden (1871–1951), both confidantes of Steiner, were also leading figures in antisemitic propaganda during the same period. Conrad Englert (1899–1945), general secretary of the Norwegian Anthroposophical Society, elaborated further on Steiner's claim that the Nordic peoples have a particular spiritual role. In his view, Norway had a special element of destiny not shared by Sweden or Denmark. He also claimed that the Nazis had derived their racial ideas from ancient Jewish sources and that Nazi persecution of Jews was, therefore, the Jews' own fault. Johannes Hohlenberg (1881–1960), who served as the general secretary of the Danish Anthroposophical Society from 1923 to 1931 and edited the Norwegian Anthroposophical journal *Vidar* from 1926 to 1940, wrote in 1931: "And the true meaning is that the highest link in human nature, the ego, can fully unfold only in a physical organism of the European type" (Ebbestad Hansen 2015: 187). In a book published in 1937, he also claimed, like Englert, that Nazi ideology was based on Jewish ideas and that Jews were the teachers of the Nazis.

Arguably the most influential Anthroposophical racist in Norway was Alf Larsen (1885–1967), a well-known and highly regarded poet. Larsen became an Anthroposophist in 1925 and played a significant role as a public exponent of Anthroposophy well into the 1950s. He was a fervent antisemite, believing in a global Jewish conspiracy to take over the world. His antisemitic writings are full of Steiner's concepts and notions, such as the idea that Jewish blood is different from that of other human beings (cf. GA 121:114). The full extent of his antisemitism was not known until 2009, when an antisemitic manuscript (*The Jewish problem, Jødeproblemet*) was discovered in his archive. In response, the governing body of the Norwegian Anthroposophical Society issued a statement asserting that Larsen's antisemitism was a personal matter that had nothing to do with Anthroposophy or Rudolf Steiner.

3.5 ITALY

In Italy, as in Norway, the racial ideas within Anthroposophy were mainly directed against Jews. The following summary of racial ideas in Italian Anthroposophy is

based on detailed studies by Peter Staudenmaier (2012; 2014: 269–272 and 284–318; 2017).

Already in Steiner's lifetime, there were ties between Fascism and Italian Anthroposophy. When Steiner reorganised the Anthroposophical Society in late 1923, Italian Anthroposophy was represented by Giovanni Antonio Colonna di Cesarò (1878–1940), who at the time was also a minister in Mussolini's government (Staudenmaier 2012). To his credit, he left the government soon afterward and became a critic of Fascism. However, several other Italian Anthroposophists continued to support the Fascist régime throughout its duration and actively contributed to its increasingly virulent racism and antisemitism. We will focus on three of them: Massimo Scaligero (1906–1980), Aniceto Del Massa (1898–1975) and Ettore Martinoli (1895–1958).

Massimo Scaligero was an Anthroposophist and a prolific author on racial topics during the fascist period. In his writings, he claimed to have found the foundation for combining biological and spiritual racism in "a definite doctrinal form in the work of Rudolf Steiner" (Staudenmaier 2014: 300). He emphasised ancient Roman glory, which he intertwined with similar ideas of Germanic superiority. He argued for the existence of an "Aryan-Mediterranean race" comprising Italians and Germans, which he contrasted with the "negroid and Semitic races" (ibid.: 295–296). His antisemitism was ferocious and included calls for "the elimination of the Judaic virus" (ibid.: 299). His writings on race were well-regarded by Mussolini and other high-ranking Fascist officials. Italian Anthroposophists have continued to acclaim him as an important spiritual leader. In 2006, a century after his birth, the Italian Anthroposophical Society held a conference honouring his work (ibid.: 269–270).

Aniceto Del Massa (1898–1975) was another Anthroposophist with an extensive output of antisemitic articles. He served as editor of the journal *Il problema ebraico* ("The Jewish Problem"), which was published by the Fascist regime. The journal provided spiritual justifications for antisemitism. It also published lists of Jews, which were likely used in the deportation of Italian Jews during the Holocaust under the German occupation of Italy from 1943 to 1945.

Ettore Martinoli was general secretary of the Italian Anthroposophical Society. He was also a long-time active member of the Fascist party, which he joined as early as in 1919. In his writings, he used Anthroposophical ideas to provide spiritual underpinnings for Fascism. In 1942, he was appointed director of the Trieste Centre for the Study of the Jewish Problem. Its initial mandate was to conduct studies and produce propaganda concerning the so-called Jewish problem, but it also searched through the city archives and registry offices in Trieste to compile a list of Jewish residents. This list likely explains why the deportation of Jews to Auschwitz during the German occupation was performed much more efficiently in Trieste than in most other parts of Italy.

3.6 SUMMARY

The examples from these five countries show that Steiner's racial teachings have played an important role in Anthroposophy throughout and beyond the twentieth century. Leading Anthroposophists in these countries regarded Steiner's views on race as an essential part of his message. Based on Steiner's ideas, they propagated false ideas about mental differences between human races, including assertions of "Aryan" supremacy and black inferiority. Some went so far as to support apartheid or actively contribute to the deportation of Jews to Nazi extermination camps. This shows that the influence of racial ideas in Anthroposophy is a much bigger matter than the issue of a few century-old quotations, which both Anthroposophists and many of their critics have reduced it to.

4. ANTHROPOSOPHICAL RESPONSES TO CRITICISM

Anthroposophical responses to criticism of the movement's racial ideas exhibit two conspicuous characteristics. First, they are almost exclusively focused on Steiner's texts. This is understandable, as most of the criticism has been directed at Steiner himself. Another reason may be that racial claims by other Anthroposophists can easily be dismissed as individual failures (at least until the full picture indicated in Section 3 is brought to the fore), but Steiner's central position within Anthroposophy seems to preclude such a response. The second striking feature is that the issue is almost always framed as one of "accusations of racism" (Rassismusvorwürfe) rather than as racism (van Baarda 2009).

In what follows, some of the most common responses to criticism of Steiner's texts on human races will be presented and analysed. They will be divided into two main categories: direct defences of his racial claims and excuses that stop short of actual defence.

4.1 DEFENCES OF STEINER'S RACIAL CLAIMS

1. *The concept of human races is respectable for biological reasons.* The Dutch commission of Anthroposophists that investigated Steiner's racial claims made the following statement:

Thus far, "race" was described as a biological concept. From a biological point of view, humans belong to the mammals. Therefore, there is no biological reason not to apply the concept of race to human populations (van Baarda 2009: 109).

This is a misleading description of biology. While some species can be divided into biological races or subspecies, *Homo sapiens* is not one of them. The genetic differences within our species are very small and do not follow the dividing-lines between the traditional races (Jablonski and Chaplin 2000; Serre and Pääbo 2004; Templeton 2013; Yudell et al. 2016). The division of humans into "black", "white", "red" etc. races has no sensible biological foundation. This was well-known at the time when the

commission made this statement. A plausible explanation for their reference to biology is that it was an attempt to neutralise the concept of race and to downplay its connection with discriminatory beliefs and behaviours.

2. *Humans of different races are different but of equal value.* In response to criticism of his promotion of Steiner's racial ideas, the Swedish Anthroposophist Hans Möller said of human races: "We are all different—that is our richness—but we have equal worth" (Möller 1992). Another Swedish Anthroposophist wrote: "The person who is observant of human differences is not a racist; racism consists of valuing one race against another" (Wilzén 1985).

This is a standard racist argument. Proponents of apartheid often agreed that people of different skin colours were of equal value but claimed that, because they were different, they should not live together or under equal conditions (Giliomee 2003: 382). A claim that black people are intellectually inferior to white people does not cease to be racist by being accompanied by a concession that they are nevertheless of equal value. The use of this argument – by Anthroposophists as well as by proponents of apartheid – appears to be an attempt to frame discriminatory statements in a way that makes them seem ethically neutral.

3. *Steiner's statements about races were concerned with spiritual realities.* The Dutch commission stated that Steiner's remarks on race can only be understood within "the context of Anthroposophical thought" (van Baarda et al. 2009: 314). They further asserted: "That which on first inspection can be perceived as a racist statement will sometimes lose this meaning when the statement is seen against the background of this Anthroposophical world of ideas" (ibid.: 315). For example, the commission applied this approach to Steiner's view that Native Americans are predestined to die out:

The reference was to certain cosmic forces associated with the planet Saturn, which have a strong preserving effect and therefore let all organic life harden and make it die out. [...] These lethal forces were the main reason why the Indian race perished, not the extermination carried out by white people (van Baarda et al. 2009: 150).

This line of argument appears to be an attempt to reframe discriminatory statements as references to a spiritual world beyond the reach of ordinary human ethical judgment. Unfortunately, historical experiences of religiously motivated persecution suggest that spiritual justifications often serve to intensify, rather than mitigate, the effects of denigrating claims about others.

4. *Since souls go through different races, valuing races differently is not discriminatory.* This argument was used by the Dutch commission:

The notion that Steiner was here advocating a racial doctrine involving the superiority of the white race is nevertheless mistaken, as his idea of

reincarnation fundamentally contradicts the idea of superiority (van Baarda et al. 2000: 323).

This is a variant of the argument that worldly injustices should be endured because they will be compensated for in the afterlife. It is often referred to as the “pie in the sky” argument and has been subject to much criticism (Sayers 2002; Howes 2024). In the Anthroposophical variant, the promised afterlife is not heavenly, but instead a new earthly life with a different skin colour. Nevertheless, it adheres to the same (highly controversial) pattern of a spiritual justification for earthly suffering. A further complication arises from Steiner’s claim that some souls become stuck in a lower race and cannot progress further (see Section 2.3.).

5. *The seemingly derogative quotes are taken out of context.* A statement by the board of the German Anthroposophical Society regarding Steiner’s texts reads:

With today’s perception of the language, some passages can give the impression of a race-related form of expression. However, serious examination of content and context will always make an opposite intention recognizable (Brüll and Heisterkamp 2020: 47).

Similarly, a spokesperson for the Waldorf schools in Berlin-Brandenburg stated that the Waldorf movement “will not dissociate itself from sentences that mean something completely different in their total context than what is insinuated here” (Zander 2009: 149).

To show that a quotation is misleading, it is not sufficient to point out that it was taken out from a larger context. It is necessary to show what part(s) of that larger context justify a reinterpretation of the quote. For instance, we saw in Section 2 that Steiner repeatedly claimed that black people are childish, have a passive mind and should not be allowed into Europe. These statements give the impression that Steiner promoted discrimination of black people. If this is an incorrect interpretation created by taking the quotations out of context, there should be other passages in these texts that render the quoted passages non-discriminatory. As far as I have seen, no such exonerating passages have been presented. However, unsubstantiated claims that such passages exist can nevertheless serve the rhetorical purpose of persuading recipients of the message that they lack sufficient information to judge whether Steiner’s statements are discriminatory.

6. *Much of what Steiner said about races only applies to the past.* The Dutch commission made the following comment on Steiner’s racial claims:

Many of these statements refer to phases in the development of humanity that occurred in the distant past. They are not applicable to today’s social conditions (van Baarda et al. 2009: 315).

It is true that Steiner wrote and spoke extensively about alleged “root races” of the past. However, he also made numerous statements about races that people living in his time, and in our time, are said to belong to. Most of these statements cannot credibly be interpreted as referring only to the past. To mention just a few examples: when he claimed that Japanese people are incapable of independent thought (GA 349:59), that Native Americans are predestined to die out (GA 121:79) and that black people should not be allowed into Europe (GA 349:53), he was clearly not speaking only of historical conditions.

The apparent aim of this argument is to convince recipients that Steiner’s writings about race are irrelevant for present-day Anthroposophical activities. It may indeed serve that purpose, since few recipients can be expected to have detailed knowledge of Steiner’s texts. However, the same aim can be achieved by pointing to the absence of racist influence in Anthroposophical activities today. Such argumentation is indeed common in Anthroposophical publications and is far more credible than the problematic interpretation of Steiner just mentioned.

7. *Steiner predicted that racial differences would lose their importance.* The Dutch commission used this argument as follows:

[T]he time epochs that Steiner denotes as “main age” or “root race” span approximately 15,000 years. Our fifth main age begins around 7,500 BC and should consequently end around 7,500 AD. This implies that, according to Steiner, in 5,500 years, the word “race” will no longer have any meaning (van Baarda et al. 2009: 131).

It is difficult to see how this argument could help allaying criticism against Steiner’s racial claims. Presumably, few would consider promises of racial equality in the distant future as making present injustices acceptable.

4.2 EXCUSES FOR STEINER’S RACIAL CLAIMS

8. *Steiner just expressed the general opinion of his time.* Steiner’s racial claims are often excused as merely reflecting the common view of his era. For instance, the board of the German Anthroposophical Society stated that his formulations were “obviously time-bound” (Brüll and Heisterkamp 2020: 47). The Dutch commission argued that around the year 1900, non-white “races” were discussed “exclusively in colonialist and Darwinist terms” (van Baarda et al. 2009: 82).

While “exclusively” may be an exaggeration, the commission is correct in remarking that racist ideas were prevalent and often dominated public discussions during Steiner’s time. On the other hand, there were also anti-racists in Steiner’s time, and Steiner could have chosen to side with them (Durkheim 1897: 54–81; House 2001; Avraham 2022). The excuse that he simply followed the mainstream seems rather weak, given the extraordinary powers and insights ascribed to him.

The commission correctly pointed out that the current negative view of the word “negro” was not present in Steiner’s time (van Baarda et al. 2009: 102). There-

fore, Steiner's use of this term should not be seen as a sign of racism. However, the commission's own use of the word, such as when speaking about "the old negro cultures", is not beyond reproach (ibid.: 263).

9. *Only a few of Steiner's statements about races would be illegal today.* This is one of the main excuses made by the Dutch commission. Their work focused on determining whether "the quotations from Rudolf Steiner would be punishable if someone were to say them today." They found only "twelve brief quotations" that would "likely constitute a criminal offence according to current criteria" (ibid.: 17).

As we saw in Section 3.2, legal action has been taken in Germany to classify some of Steiner's texts as incitement to hatred, which would have led to restrictions on their dissemination. Therefore, it is not surprising that Anthroposophists pay considerable attention to the question whether his texts contain passages that violate hate speech laws. However, mere legality is a remarkably weak defence of Steiner's writings. In countries that have criminalised hate speech, only severe forms of verbal atrocity are punishable.

10. *Steiner did not have an ideology about a struggle between races.* In an article in an Anthroposophical journal, Jens Heisterkamp stated:

In Steiner, there is no racism in the sense of a deliberate debasement of the other in favour of one's own, and certainly no ideology of a "race struggle", as was otherwise characteristic of racist viewpoints at the turn of the twentieth century (Heisterkamp 2023: 55).

This is not correct. As we saw in Section 2.6, Steiner claimed that "a fierce fight between the white humanity and the coloured humanity in a wide variety of areas" was necessary to achieve cultural and spiritual progress. Perhaps more importantly, just like the previous argument, this one places remarkably low demands on Steiner. Racism can be vicious without promoting fights. One possible reason for choosing such a weak criterion may be that Steiner clearly fails by stronger criteria, such as refraining from derogatory statements about races.

11. *Steiner had no race doctrine, as he did not claim that some races are superior to others.* This is one of the main arguments put forth by the Dutch commission. They defined a race doctrine (Rassenlehre) as follows:

The commission understands the term race doctrine to mean an ostensibly scientific theory on the basis of which the alleged superiority of one race at the expense of others is legitimized (van Baarda et al. 2000: 326).

Based on this definition, they drew the following conclusion:

In the collected works of Rudolf Steiner, there is no race doctrine (van Baarda et al. 2000: 317).

However, as we saw in Section 2, Steiner repeatedly claimed that the white race was “higher” than all other existing human races. He also stated that white people have reached “a higher cultural level” than other races (GA 100:244) and that they comprise “the current civilised humanity” (GA 11:44). They are “the actual cultural race” responsible for developing “through logical thinking the tools for transforming nature through mere human reason” (GA 54:144). Of all races, they are the ones who “develop humanness within themselves” (GA 349:62) and are tasked with going “from the senses to the spiritual” (GA 121:115–116). It is difficult to see how this would not imply a “superiority of one race at the expense of others.”

Since it is not clearly defined what qualifies a standpoint as a doctrine (“Lehre”), it is arguably less clear whether Steiner’s racial views constitute such a doctrine. However, as we saw in Section 2.9, he consistently maintained the view that human souls reincarnate into different races, and that reincarnation into a white body represents a progression from previous incarnations in other races. Equally consistently, he attributed distinct mental characteristics to people with different skin colours. It is difficult to see why this would not amount to a “Lehre” in the ordinary sense of the word.

It is significant that the commission focused on whether Steiner had a racial doctrine, rather than on whether he held racist standpoints and attitudes. It is possible (and seemingly quite common) to hold racist views without adhering to any specific racial doctrine. Again, a plausible reason for the choice of a lower threshold may be that acquittal would have been impossible with the higher requirement.

12. *Steiner presented his ideas on race only in internal forums, not to the public.* According to the Dutch commission, Steiner made his more controversial statements in internal forums. He could not have foreseen that “his statements in lectures delivered at more or less closed meetings (for members and guests, for construction workers at the Goetheanum) would, eighty years later, be distributed via the Internet to computer screens all over the world” (van Baarda et al. 2000: 17).

As we saw in Section 2.2, Steiner presented his ideas about higher and lower races in public lectures in Berlin in 1905 and 1906. However, the vast majority of his lectures, including those on human races, were delivered to members of Theosophical and Anthroposophical organisations. Unfortunately, the commission does not clarify why or to what extent the dissemination of problematic racial claims can be excused by being confined to internal meetings within a large organisation. The evidence summarised in Section 3 shows that such internal dissemination can have serious consequences, such as schoolchildren being taught racially prejudiced ideas.

13. *The statements on races were only a small part of Steiner’s overall work.* This argument was used by the Dutch commission. They reported that fewer than one in a thousand of the 89,000 pages in his collected works contain statements they considered problematic (van Baarda et al. 2009: 321).

Both in terms of proportion and content, the attention that Rudolf Steiner devoted to the topic of race in his voluminous work is so minimal that,

for this reason alone, the existence of a race doctrine is out of the question (ibid.: 313).

The commission did not explain how producing many pages on other subjects can excuse or mitigate a person's questionable statements about race. This argument is perhaps best understood as an expression of frustration over a situation in which the focus is on Steiner's racial views rather than his extensive works on other subjects.

Recent Anthroposophical literature on Steiner's views on race is marked by a delicate balance. On one hand, these authors do not defend Steiner's praise of the white race or his disparaging claims about other races. On the other hand, they neither criticise him outright nor assert that he was wrong or that he expressed racist ideas. Instead, a large number of rather weak defences of his assertions on race are presented, such as that most people of his time held similar views, that he only spoke about race at internal Anthroposophical meetings, that only a few of his statements would be illegal hate speech today, that most of his texts focus on subjects other than race, etc. This creates the impression of a rhetorical impasse that has much to do with the veneration of Steiner. His statements about race are integrated with other elements of his spiritual worldview, from which they cannot easily be separated. (As we noted in Section 2.8, Steiner said in 1923 that one could "only understand everything spiritual in the correct sense if one first devotes oneself to how the spiritual in the human being acts specifically through the colour of the skin.") Consequently, it may be difficult to reject his views on race without calling Anthroposophy as a whole into question. Similar phenomena can be found in other spiritual and religious movements (Barkun 1997; Hall et al. 2010).

5. CONCLUSION

The facts are clear: For over two decades, Rudolf Steiner repeatedly and consistently lectured and wrote about the alleged characteristics of various human races. His disparaging claims about what he called "lower" races, that is, all races except the white one, coincide with the common messages of white and "Aryan" supremacists. Leading Anthroposophists in at least five European countries adopted these beliefs and spread racist claims about people with skin colours different from their own. A few of them promoted apartheid or contributed to the Nazi extermination of Jews. In response to criticism of this racist heritage, Anthroposophists attempt to exonerate Steiner and portray the wrongdoings of other leading members of their movement as individual deviations. Is there any chance of rehabilitation for a movement in such a state of denial of its racist legacy?

Possibly, but only if its members choose to confront the truth, acknowledge the painful past and search for ways to make amends and improve. As Desmond Tutu emphasised in the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, trying to hide or forget the past is no solution:

There were others who urged that the past should be forgotten – glibly declaring that we should “let bygones be bygones”. This option was rightly rejected because such amnesia would have resulted in further victimisation of victims by denying their awful experiences... The other reason amnesia simply will not do is that the past refuses to lie down quietly. It has an uncanny habit of returning to haunt one. “Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it” are the words emblazoned at the entrance to the museum in the former concentration camp of Dachau. They are words we would do well to keep ever in mind. However painful the experience, the wounds of the past must not be allowed to fester. They must be opened. They must be cleansed. And balm must be poured on them so they can heal. This is not to be obsessed with the past. It is to take care that the past is properly dealt with for the sake of the future (Tutu 1998: 17).

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All translations are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

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