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Herder: culture, anthropology and the Enlightenment

DAVID DENBY

ABSTRACT

The anthropological sensibility has often been seen as growing out of
opposition to Enlightenment universalism. Johann Gottfried Herder
(1744–1803) is often cited as an ancestor of modern cultural relativism,
in which cultures exist in the plural. This article argues that Herder's
anthropology, and anthropology generally, are more closely related to
Enlightenment thought than is generally considered. Herder certainly
attacks Enlightenment abstraction, the arrogance of its Eurocentric
historical teleology, and argues the case for a proto-hermeneutical
approach which emphasizes embeddedness, horizon, the usefulness of
prejudice. His suspicion of the ideology of progress and of associated
theories of stadial development leads to a critique of cosmopolitanism
and, particularly, of colonialism. But a comparison with a central
Enlightenment figure like the natural historian Buffon (1708–88)
reveals shared anthropological assumptions: human beings are charac-
terized by the flexibility of their relationship to their environment, and
by their ability to transmit and receive social knowledge. Herder's
critique of progress is thus an unstable one: culture [*Kultur*] as the
process through which humanity develops can also be called Enlighten-
ment [*Aufklärung*]. Herder's definition of culture is much closer to a
unitary Enlightenment model of *civilization* than is frequently sug-
gested. Herder's relativism is thus open to question: he holds on to
certain universal criteria for transcultural judgements. This reassess-
ment of Herder's place in Enlightenment anthropology raises questions

of contemporary relevance regarding cultural relativism on the one hand, and modernization and globalization on the other.

Key words   civilization,   culture,   Enlightenment anthropology, the Enlightenment,   progress

This article brings together two approaches to the work of Johann Gottfried Herder, belonging to different spheres of scholarly activity: contemporary discourse about culture and cultural relativism, and the history of anthropology and the human sciences. It does so, moreover, in the belief that the historical insights provided by the second field shed critical light on certain assumptions which are prevalent in the former. My approach is thus sympathetic to David Hollinger's call for historians to challenge some of the historical oversimplifications which have sustained contemporary positions in the 'Enlightenment debate' (Hollinger, 2001: 7–18).

The ideological oppositions and alignments which I am addressing have relatively wide currency in political, social and ethical discussion today. The key issue is universalism, an Enlightenment value that has come under attack from a variety of positions (communitarian, feminist, postmodern) as hegemonic and dominatory. These critiques have made it increasingly difficult to argue that transcultural values exist and have a grounding in something called human nature. This has obvious repercussions for human rights; and it has a crucial impact in the area of multiculturalism, since the central values of unitary republicanism or liberalism are challenged in the name of different cultures.[1]

This debate is reflected within the more specialized discourses of anthropology and the history of ideas, in a conviction that the anthropological sensibility is in itself a reaction against the Enlightenment.

> Whatever else modern anthropology asserts – and it seems to have asserted almost everything at one time or another – it is firm in the conviction that men unmodified by the customs of particular places do not in fact exist, have never existed and, most important, could not in the very nature of the case exist. (Geertz, 1993: 35)

Clifford Geertz's only slightly tongue-in-cheek comment gestures towards two linked assumptions. First, anthropology, cultural sensitivity and multiculturalism are about cultures conceived as plural and distinct one from another; second, and crucially, this kind of pluralism is antithetical to the universalism that is taken to be the fundamental value-system of the Enlightenment. According to R. A. Shweder, 'anthropology's romantic rebellion against the Enlightenment' is based on a view of cultural practices as symbolic, expressive, and fundamentally arbitrary and non-rational. Human

beings live within inherited frames of meaning which constitute their horizon of interpretation, and which are fundamentally incommensurable. Normative Enlightenment notions of historical progress are replaced by a view, reminiscent of Foucault and Kuhn, that historical change is simply a process of frame-switching (Shweder, 1984).

The primary rationale for looking at the anthropological thinking of the Enlightenment will already be evident: it is a way of establishing whether the supposed antithesis between anthropology and Enlightenment is historically sustainable. The particular reason for focussing on Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) is that, in genealogies of relativist and culturalist thinking, Herder is frequently cited as an 18th-century pioneer. According to the American historian of anthropology, George W. Stocking, Franz Boas (1858–1942) is the originator of the modern notion of cultures as entities existing in the plural, distinct from and impervious to each other; but he argues that Boas brought with him from Germany to America a tradition of German thought which, via Lazarus and Steinthal, can be traced back to Herder (Stocking, 1968: 201–14). Samuel Fleischacker also argues that Herder is the originator of the modern, plural sense of culture, which is transmitted forward to Franz Boas (Fleischacker, 1994: 119ff.). Focusing more on the linguistic tradition, George Steiner sketches a trajectory leading from Herder to Humboldt, then via Steinthal to Franz Boas and thence to the ethno-linguistics of Sapir and Whorf (Steiner, 1978: 138–43). (The so-called Sapir–Whorf hypothesis that language radically influences the world-view of its speakers is an important component of contemporary culturalism.) Clifford Geertz, finally, suggests an opposition between a generic and a configurational model of culture, the latter coming to fruition in Malinowski but having among its predecessors Herder and the Humboldts (Geertz, 2000: 248–9).[2]

John Zammito observes that recent work on Herder has tended to show Herder's status as an Enlightenment thinker, and that will be the general trend of my own argument (Zammito, 2002: 302ff.). Nevertheless, Herder himself, like Burke, places key aspects of his own thought about culture in opposition to elements of mainstream Enlightenment thinking, often explicitly and self-consciously. To examine Herder's thinking about culture and related issues therefore represents, almost by definition, a contribution to the necessary rehistoricizing of at least one component of the Enlightenment debate.

The work with which Herder first gained notoriety is his *Yet Another Philosophy of History for the Education of Mankind* [*Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit*, 1774], and this is a good place to begin since it is here that the relationship between his central ideas and a critique of Enlightenment (mostly French) philosophers is most clearly articulated.[3] Abstraction is the key target. Universalizing attempts to bring

diversity under a single term are illusory because they replace reality with words; furthermore, since those words originate in the person producing the analysis, the process is one of 'comparing everything, in general or in particular, with yourself. For it would be manifest stupidity to consider yourself to be the quintessence of all times and all peoples.' The reality which Herder wants to reinstate is that of 'applied skills and practices'. The fundamental anthropological assumption underlying his analysis is that human societies develop as a response to particular historical constraints and challenges. Our powers and tendencies are 'proportionally related to given purposes' (B:184). Human nature is not an 'independent deity': the human drive towards progress and perfectibility is only revealed in the struggle with given situations and constraints. It is in this sense that 'each form of human perfection is . . . national and time-bound'. Philosophers have been wrong to think of happiness as being a unitary, universal notion: happiness too is situation-dependent, it lies 'in the soul which needs this, aspires to that, has attained this and claims no more – each nation has its centre of happiness within itself, just as every sphere has its centre of gravity' (B:186).

There is clearly a strong hermeneutic and social-psychological element in Herder's thinking, which comes out clearly in the thematics of the horizon. Mother Nature has placed in men's hearts inclinations towards diversity, says Herder, and this inclination is placed in the

> . . . circle around us; she has restricted man's view so that by force of habit the circle becomes a horizon, beyond which he could not see nor scarcely speculate. All that is akin to my nature, all that can be assimilated by it, I hanker and strive after, and adopt; beyond that, kind nature has armed me with insensibility, coldness and blindness, which can even turn into contempt and disgust. Her only aim is to force me back on myself so that I find satisfaction in my own centre.

Prejudice, that great Enlightenment bogie, is another name for this functionally productive centredness: although it may result from the distance between nations becoming too great, prejudice may also be a force for the good, for it 'urges nations to converge upon their centre, attaches them more firmly to their roots, causes them to flourish after their kind' (B:186). The echoes of theories of in-group solidarity and out-group hostility in contemporary social psychology are very strong.[4] Neither, given the communitarian emphasis of his work, is it surprising that Charles Taylor has argued for the importance of Herder (Taylor, 1991).

Some of these hermeneutic ideas are developed in the *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* [*Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, 1784–91]. Perhaps most important is the significance which Herder attaches to the psychological aspects of cultural belonging, what we might describe as the *interiority* of culture, although the terms which we find

in Herder are usually the *imagination* or the *fancy*.[5] Human beings inherit, from the earliest years of their upbringing, mythological representations and cosmogonies which are theirs, and which Herder presents as a sort of bedrock for their understanding of the world. Isaiah Berlin (1976: 166ff.) speaks in this context of Herder's 'expressionism': drawing on the work of his mentor Hamann, Herder believes that thought is not abstract and culturally neutral, but is intimately related to the language in which we are socialized, which carries with it a world-view. This linkage of world-view and imagination does indeed suggest that Herder views group identity as non-rational, in line with Shweder's already-cited interpretation of the origins of anthropology. The *Journal of my Voyage in the Year 1769* contains reflections on the place of the poetic faculty in the world-view of each nation. Developing Hume's work on probability, Herder argues that something as fundamental and structuring as expectations about how the world operates actually vary across cultures. Herder dreams of the work he will write, which will set side by side

> . . . a man from Judaea, a Job from Arabia, a seer from Egypt, a Roman hero, a friend of the clergy, a crusader, a virtuoso of our own society: all set alongside each other and each of them revealing the spirit of his age, the nature of his mind, the manner his character is formed, and the way he conceived of virtue and happiness. (B:76)

The corollary of this is an undermining of the idea of progress, a widely although not unanimously accepted tenet of Enlightenment thought. Herder takes issue, first of all, with the notion of steady, unilinear development. He explicitly opposes his conception of cultural difference to the stadial theories which were so current in Enlightenment thinking about social evolution. It is customary, he says, to

> . . . divide the nations of the earth into hunters, fishermen, shepherds, and husbandmen; and not only to determine their rank in civilization from this division, but even to consider civilization itself as a necessary consequence of this or that way of life. (M:51ff.)

But within one way of life or mode of production, there is variation from one region to another: there are different ways of being a husbandman, determined by environment and by learned tradition. The mentality of the nomad must be taken seriously, says Herder: his rejection of settlement and agriculture is motivated by a view which considers the 'inhabitant of a hut as a shackled beast of burden, as a degenerate and sequestered variety of the species'. He is not seeking to criticize the settled, agricultural mode of production from which he himself benefits ('for I myself eat the bread it has produced'), but ours remains a minority form of social organization in planetary terms: 'let justice be done to other ways of life, which, from the

constitution of our earth, have been destined, equally with agriculture, to contribute to the education of mankind' (M:57).

Secondly, he is critical of Enlightenment approaches to history, which he sees as tending to mock the past, reducing past epochs to units which will be measured, positively or negatively, against a contemporary scale of values. 'The whole earth becomes a dung-heap on which we, like crows, scratch for grains of corn. Such is the philosophy of the century' (B:212). This, once again, is to abstract from historical reality. It is a function of the mistaken belief that history is driven by ideas, a view which negates the *dispositions* which animate mankind. Legislation is the translation of ideas into the socio-political sphere: but laws based on 'maxims of philanthropy and wisdom' considered valid for all times and all peoples are just 'paper-culture' (B:203). How can such laws take root? In order to do so, a law should fit a particular people as perfectly as an item of clothing, by virtue of having emerged in response to the particular circumstances of that people.[6]

Montesquieu's *Esprit des lois* [Spirit of the Laws] (1748) was the major Enlightenment reference on the relationship between legal systems, historical evolution, climatic and environmental influence, and national character. Barnard points out that Herder, like Rousseau in his work on Poland and Corsica, follows Montesquieu in grappling with the interrelation between institutional-cultural and environmental-natural forces, and this leads both thinkers to reflect on the question of what institutions suit a particular nation (Barnard, 2003: 41).[7] Herder read Montesquieu during his 1769 journey to France, and acknowledges the Frenchman's influence.[8] Montesquieu's work is important in the emergence of two linked trends in modern thought: social science and historicism. Societies obey their own specific laws, and this constitutes a decisive break with the classical humanist view that an ideal society can be derived from some interpretation of human or divine nature. Herder sees Montesquieu as someone who pointed the way in the development of an historical understanding of different societies and forms of government, but whose work did not go far enough. Herder's criticism of Montesquieu goes in two directions. First, Montesquieu's theory of government, based on a triple typology of despotism, monarchy and democracy, is a vast oversimplification. 'The principles developed by Montesquieu allow a hundred different peoples to be reckoned up extempore on a political multiplication table' (B:198–9). Another Montesquieu is needed to 'really offer us the spirit of the laws and governments of our globe, instead of a mere classification of governments into three or four empty categories, when in fact no two governments are alike . . . The genius of our earth as one entity is lost in this way.' What is needed is a presentation of civil history in which, 'despite the apparent uniformity, no one scene occurs twice' (B:325). Diversity and unity appear as two sides of the same phenomenon: infinite variations on a single shared potentiality, irreducible to a simplified typology. Herder's second criticism

bears on what he takes to be Montesquieu's simplified and deterministic theory of climatic and environmental influence. Herder's theory of climate is clearly influenced by vitalism: as well as environmental factors, he identifies what he calls the genetic factor, which applies to an individual but also to a people, and which dictates an irreducible individuality. 'Whatever climate may effect, every man, every animal, every plant, has his own climate; for every one receives all external impressions in his own manner, and modifies them according to his organs' (M:23). Barnard calls this the non-Lockean component in Herder's thinking (Barnard, 2003: 121–5). *Klima* for Herder is a combination of external and internal factors: environmental factors can, over time, inflect given nature, but the resistance of the latter is strong, which calls into question the viability of enterprises, whether colonial or utopian, which seek to import artificial values into a given social milieu.

The rootedness which Herder considers crucial to the functioning of a society is threatened by at least three distinct forces. First, the state machine of centralizing monarchy, which Herder appears to see as coterminous with Enlightenment, and which 'furthers the greatest virtue of our times: the resignation of the individual human being' (B:208). Barnard is right to describe Herder's thinking in this area as 'anarcho-pluralist' (B:7–8).

> The garment of generalities which characterizes our philosophy and philanthropy can conceal oppressions, infringements on the true personal freedom of men and of countries, of citizens and peoples, in a manner that would have appealed to Caesar Borgia. (B:220)

Secondly, at European level, national characters are being destroyed: 'attachment to the soil where one was born and in which one was buried' are seen, from the cosmopolitan point of view, as 'eternal barbarism':

> ... with us, thank God, national character is no more! we love each other and every one, or rather, we can dispense with love ... We no longer have a fatherland or kinship feelings; instead, we are all philanthropic citizens of the world ... National cultures, where are you? (B:209)[9]

Herder's position here is very close to Rousseau's critique of cosmopolitanism in the *Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne* [Considerations on the Government of Poland] (Rousseau, 1964: 960). The third standardizing threat is colonialism, which he denounced throughout his career with a vehemence comparable to that of Diderot. For centuries, the aim of Europe (this 'happiness-dispensing deity') has been to 'erect herself into a despot, compelling all the nations of the Earth to be happy in her way'. But, so far, 'No Nimrod has yet been able to drive all the inhabitants of the World into one park for himself and his successors' (M:76–8). While slavery in Europe has been abolished because slaves are less productive than free men, we

continue to enslave people who are neither European nor Christian. The devastation which we visit on three continents also comes back to haunt us: 'we in turn are depopulated, emasculated and debauched as a result. Such is the happy nature of the exchange' (B:209).[10]

That there is a nostalgic element in Herder's thinking is clear. His validation of the conceptual horizon, his praise of rootedness, are not only contributions to a nascent hermeneutic mode of understanding history: they are constructed on the back of his critique of what he sees as the Enlightenment's abstract, rootless cosmopolitanism. Buried in his relativist statement that 'it would be the most stupid vanity to imagine, that all the inhabitants of the World must be European to live happily' (M:71) is the conviction, in which Herder is not alone,[11] that savages are happier than Europeans.

> The savage has room in his poor hut for every stranger, whom he receives as his brother with calm benevolence, and asks not once whence he comes. The deluged heart of the idle cosmopolite is a hut for no one. (M:76)

There is also, clearly, a strong nationalist element in his thinking: the nation is seen as a natural unit possessing the legitimacy of an original subjectivity. Nations are frequently described as having the same natural transparency, the same lack of artificiality, as relations between members of a family.

> A kingdom consisting of a single nation is a family, a well-regulated household: it reposes on itself, for it is founded by Nature, and stands and falls by time alone. An empire formed by forcing together a hundred nations, and a hundred and fifty provinces, is no body politic, but a monster. (M:130)

An opposition between Herder's thought and certain key Enlightenment notions is the leitmotif of the sketch which I have just presented. It reproduces the accepted view of Herder as an early pioneer of culturalist hermeneutics, and there is no doubt that, as well as being a coherent and satisfying picture, it has a basis in fact. However, in the second part of this article my purpose is to complicate this picture and to show in what ways Herder's thought is consistent with, indeed part of, the first stirrings of what we should call an Enlightenment anthropology or science of man. That such an anthropology can be considered part of Enlightenment thought rather than a 'romantic rebellion' against it is, of course, in itself significant, and I shall return at the end to a brief consideration of the overall significance of such a claim.

But I want to refer immediately to recent work by two historians of ideas which helps to situate Herder's thinking within rather than against the Enlightenment. Robert S. Leventhal (1990) and John H. Zammito (2002)

both argue that Herder's contribution to an emerging human science or anthropology is predicated on a break with metaphysics, deductive philosophy, *Schulphilosophie*. Leventhal quotes from the 1765 text '*Wie die Philosophie zum besten des Volkes allgemeiner and nützlicher werden kann*' [How philosophy can become more universal and useful for the benefit of the people]:

> All philosophy, if it is going to be of the people, must render the people the central point, and if one alters the point of view of philosophy in such a way, as the Copernican system emerged from the Ptolemaic, what new fruitful developments would have to appear, once our entire philosophy becomes Anthropology.[12]

Comparing this move to Hume's 'feminization' of philosophical discourse, Leventhal says that Herder's anthropology is 'a dialogical and practical discipline of self-formation' which 'effects a new communicative linkage with society as a whole'. Philosophy in this view becomes 'an analytics of finitude' which accepts that meaning is the product of humans in history, not a ground of that history, and Herder thus represents nothing less than the 'point of discursive rupture between classical knowledge and modernity, the area of emergence, an explicit, theoretical articulation of a foundation of the "human sciences"' (Leventhal, 1990: 182–7). Such an interpretation certainly squares with aspects of Herder's biography: a boy of humble origins and a voracious reader, he was partly self-taught, although he was famously influenced by two teachers in Königsberg: Hamann and Kant. From 1776 onwards, when he moved to Weimar at the invitation of Duke Karl-August, he occupied a number of positions in which he set about modernizing public education. This involvement of philosophy in public education is moreover entirely consonant with the moment in German cultural history: classical and imported foreign modes of thought are being rejected in favour of the notion that culture belongs to all and is expressive of a nascent national identity.

Zammito provides a rich socio-historical context for this shift: in Germany from the 1760s onwards a movement of *Popularphilosophie*, significantly influenced by British empiricism, questions the deductive premises of philosophy as traditionally practised and argues that philosophy must take account of the embodied and sensual character of human experience. The movement found institutional expression in the Göttingen programme, of which the key text is Ernst Platner's *Anthropologie für Ärtze und Weltweise* [Anthropology for Doctors and Philosophers] (1772). Platner was a pupil of Ernesti, who had himself been influenced by Diderot's vision of philosophy as a discourse which could and should be made accessible to the people (Mortier, 1974). Zammito presents the movement as a German incarnation of the philosophical medicine associated with the medical school of Montpellier in France earlier in the century, and emphasizes that anthropology in this

view is to be understood as a meeting-point between the physiological and the psychological (Zammito, 2002: 151–4; 237–54).[13]

Leventhal and Zammito allow us to conceptualize the fact that Herder's concern for application, his insistence that human creativity finds expression in different forms according to a variety of historical and environmental determining factors, does not in any sense equate with a rejection of Enlightenment thinking. On this view, Herder's target is much more the metaphysical *Schulphilosophie* which Voltaire loved to deflate, which is accused of being deductive and a priori in character, of proceeding as though human beings existed in some ideal, abstract realm and not in the embodied world of history and social relations. Indeed this account places at the door of abstract metaphysics the vices which the culturalist account of Herder attributes to Enlightenment, and, conversely, brings out some of the 'communitarian' aspects of an Enlightenment which seeks to make philosophy part of the *Lebenswelt*.

Robert Wokler has argued for the need to rediscover the anthropology of the Enlightenment, a body of thought lost to history, perhaps because the anthropologists of the 19th century denied that 18th-century heritage.

> In discrediting the claims of those who speculated about mankind's nature and development before anthropology became professionalised, its practitioners risk adopting a view of their own past which is more shallow and ill-informed than the doctrines about human nature they have now relegated to the prehistory of contemporary science. (Wokler, 1993: 121)

A significant part of the task of recovering Enlightenment anthropology involves overcoming divisions and contradictions which have emerged since the end of the 18th century.

One such division is between the biological and the social. For Claude Blanckaert, part of the significance of what he calls the 'naturalist moment in human science' is that the biological and the social have not yet become antithetical discourses: it is still possible to use both registers in the description of human facts (Blanckaert, 2000: 151). Another way of putting this is to say that natural history and civil history are coterminous (Wood, 1996: 201). Now, just as Buffon is claimed in the 19th century as a precursor of physical anthropology (Blanckaert, 1993), so Herder comes to enjoy the status of precursor, but this time he is claimed by the left, i.e. by the cultural anthropological tradition.[14] It is for this reason that I propose now to look briefly at Buffon and Herder in comparative mode.

Herder and Buffon consistently agree on a fundamental picture of humans as creatures who strive to transform their potentiality through an encounter with concrete problems in particular environmental circumstances. Of

course, this view is not exclusive to Herder and Buffon: elements of it can be found, for instance, in Hobbes and Locke, in Rousseau and Diderot, although there is no space to pursue these connections here. But the degree of overlap between the naturalist and the culturalist suggests to me that Herder is closer to Enlightenment thinking about the basis of human culture than has sometimes been realized.

Contextuality and environment are crucial factors in the thought of Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon (1708–88), the great French natural historian and director of the Paris *Jardin du Roi*. Buffon is now recognized as having made a significant contribution to the emergence of the human sciences in the second half of the 18th century (Blanckaert, 1993 and 2000; Duchet, 1995). Buffon was translated very early in Germany, and Herder read him, as did Kant. Buffon's long chapter on the varieties of the human species ['*Variétés dans l'espèce humaine*'] in *De la nature de l'homme* [Of the Nature of Man] (1749) was widely read and quoted. For Buffon, natural history and the science of man are closely related, because of his commitment to an empirical-historical approach which generates a vision of the development of human societies through a dialectical relation between human potentiality and environment.

Herder shares a number of important ideas with Buffon. In Book 7 of the *Reflections*, Herder disagrees with his teacher Kant on the need to use the term 'race' to describe the divisions within humanity. Like Buffon, he insists on the unity of the human race, and says that such questions belong not to natural history, but rather to the 'physico-geographical history of man' (M:7). Crucially, Herder and Buffon share an insistence on the separation between humans and animals. For Buffon, one of the major corollaries of this is the flexibility of humans: less rigidly constrained by their environment than animals, humans are more flexible and more able to manipulate their environment through knowledge and technology, much of it passed down from previous generations and therefore social in character. In '*Nomenclature des singes*' [Nomenclature of monkeys], Buffon distinguishes between two types of education. Individual education is what an animal gives to its young; in this case, what is communicated is 'that which they hold from Nature'. Humans are characterized by what Buffon calls 'species education' ['*éducation de l'espèce*']; here, the parents pass on knowledge which they 'have received from their ancestors and from the society of which they are a part . . . this is an institution in which the whole species participates, the product of which is the basis and linkage of society' (Buffon, 1766: 36–7).

A similar comparison between animal and human in the '*Discours sur la nature des animaux*' (1753) brings out the importance of collaboration, what Herder calls the chain ['*Kette*'] of culture. Rejecting Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*, Buffon argues that human societies are not like the bee-hive:

> Amongst humans, society depends less on physical harmony than on moral relations. Man . . . saw that solitude was for him nothing more than a state of danger and war . . . he sought safety and peace in society, to which he brought his strength and knowledge in order to increase them by uniting them with those of others: this assembly is the finest work of man, the wisest product of his reason. He is only at peace, only strong, only great, only in command of the universe because he learned how to command himself, to tame himself, to impose laws on himself; in a word, man is only man because he has learned to unite with other men. (Buffon, 1753: 96)

Rational association, involving a trade-off between freedom and security, and the exchange of independent will for control over the will of others, appears as the fulfilment of human potentiality.[15]

Herder uses the term *Humanität* to refer to a common human essence. 'To trace this human essence in its manifold expressions, in social intercourse, in politics, in scientific and artistic pursuits, is the true function of social philosophy' (B:271). As Barnard and Adler point out, *Humanität* does not refer to a moral norm or sentiment, as its French and English equivalents and the alternative German term *Menschheit* often did (Barnard, 1965: 97; Adler, 1994: 62–5). *Humanität* is that potentiality which is fashioned differently by different peoples: it is devoid of concrete or particular meaning until it appears in specific historical, geographical, cultural formations. *Bildung* and *Erziehung* are two of the processes by which the potentiality of *Humanität* is developed. Philosophy has wrongly thought of human beings as self-made, but in reality 'the whole chain of human development is characterized by man's dependence on his fellows'. Because we do not possess instinct, 'it is only by training and experience that our lives take shape' (B:311–12).

Transformation, then, is the ground where Buffon and Herder meet. Yet there is a tension in Herder's thought, since there are circumstances where he is drawn poetically or rhetorically to naturalist metaphors when seeking to emphasize the diversity of humanity and the importance of the differences between human groups, differences which, as we have seen, he believes Enlightenment thinkers try to minimize. At these moments, Herder has recourse to a language of fixity, not of transformation or becoming. Strangely, it is immediately after his rejection of race as a relevant category that he speaks of the Kalmuc and the Mungal as

> fitted for no region but their own hills and mountains . . . In every other region of the earth the Mungal has either degenerated or improved: in his own country he is what he was thousands of years ago, and such will he continue, as long as it remains unaltered by nature or by art. The Arab of the desert belongs to it, as much as his noble horse, and his patient, indefatigable camel. (M:8–10)

Overall, however, we can say that the transformative mode is the dominant one in Herder. In a key passage of the *Reflections*, he speaks of the 'second genesis' of human beings, in which information transmitted by tradition is assimilated and applied. This process, he says, can be called both Enlightenment [*Aufklärung*] and culture [*Kultur*]; if we call it enlightenment, we insist on 'the light it affords to his understanding', whereas the use of the term culture likens the process to 'the cultivation of the soil'. The difference between enlightened and unenlightened, cultured and uncultured peoples, Herder goes on, is a matter of degree, and we must not establish arbitrary distinctions between the two terms (B:313).

Barnard's translation of this last point is revealing: for '*willkührliche Unterschiede zwischen Kultur und Aufklärung*', he has 'arbitrary distinctions between cultures and modes of enlightenment' (Herder, 1877–1913: Vol. 13, 348).[16] This is not the only place where a singular *Kultur* becomes a plural *cultures*.[17] Barnard's translation is the indication of an anachronistic reading of Herder. Various closely related terms do appear in the plural in Herder's text: *Völker* [peoples], *Nationen* [nations], *Zeiten* [epochs], *Sitten* [customs], *Nationalcharaktere* [national characters], but it seems to me to be pressing too hard to argue that 'for the most part, Herder preferred to speak of specific cultures (in the plural) rather than of culture in general' (Barnard, 2003: 143). Barnard acknowledges in this recent work that Herder's cultural relativism does not go the whole way, that his 'terminological belligerence' is a response to the omnipresence of the universalizing mode of thought among his contemporaries (Barnard, 2003: 137). But, as far as I can see, the noun *Kultur* remains a singular in Herder. This is important, since the singular denotes a process, not an identifiable and pluralizable entity. And that process, in as much as it is one that stretches across times and peoples, transforming the given material of *Humanität*, is much closer to the French Enlightenment's *civilization* than the standard reading of Herder as the precursor of Boasian cultural anthropology would have us believe.[18]

This, it seems to me, allows us to place some limits on Herder's supposed relativism. That *Kultur* and *Aufklärung* can be two alternative ways of describing the same process is extremely revealing. Herder is undoubtedly very hostile to the arrogance which makes European standards and practices the norm which all societies should follow, the *telos* toward which history is moving. He is equally committed to the parallel notion that

> . . . even the most primitive and the most savage peoples display the power of ideas. Irrespective of what they fight for, they fight under the impulse of ideas. The cannibal, no doubt, expresses his craving for revenge and bravery in an abominable manner, but this does not make his craving any less *spiritual*. (B:278)

But the fact remains that there are for him criteria which allow us to judge

the contribution which different civilizations have made to history. The contrast between the Phoenician empire and more recent European expansion is a telling one: where we 'made slaves, preached the cross, and exterminated the natives', the Phoenicians 'in the proper sense of the term, conquered nothing: they planted colonies, they built towns, and roused the industry of the nations' (M:148). With the growth of reason, the principal motive behind travel and navigation shifts from conquest to trade, 'which is founded on reciprocal justice and courtesy, on a progressive emulation to excel in arts and industry, in short, on humanity and its eternal laws' (M:92). Imperial domination is not the only mode of expansion; in passages reminiscent of Whitman, he talks about humans 'launching out onto the boundless ocean', in an entirely positive picture of globalization as the destiny of man. 'To him the Earth is given; and he will not desist, till it is wholly his own, at least as regards knowledge and use' (M:108). Agriculture, despite his strictures on stadial theory, is presented as superior to hunter-gatherer economies (M:110). How far from Rousseau, and how close to Buffon, is the passage where Herder talks about the advantages of trade:

> Every addition to the useful arts secures men's property, diminishes their labour, extends their sphere of activity, and necessarily lays therewith the foundations of further cultivation and humanity. (M:110–11)

The underlying metaphor of this aspect of Herder's thinking is thus very different from the images of fixity, rootedness, and restriction of horizon which characterize his praise of cultural specificity. Here, openness, expansion, hybridity and emulation all bear a positive charge, and closure and restriction take on a negative connotation: 'everything was confined, mutilated, oppressed' before the Italian city-states of the Renaissance began a process of opening out based on science, trade, luxury and competition (M:359).[19] 'The sovereignty of Europe is founded on activity and invention, on science and united emulative exertions' (M:397).

This phase of Herder's thought is profoundly at odds with an essentialist culturalism which sees identities as naturally or metaphysically given, by analogy with animals, whose nature is closely determined by environment. The whole question of cultural influence, of diffusion and emulation and hybridity, is opened up. The notion that a society can act as a diffusor of civilization is accepted: not all expansion is dominatory.

> Tradition in itself is an excellent institution of nature, indispensable to the human race; but when it fetters the thinking faculty both in politics and education, and prevents all progress of the intellect, and all the improvement, that new times and circumstances demand, it is the true narcotic of the mind, as well to nations and sects, as to individuals. (M:164)

This applies even to the Germans:

> We Germans would, like the Indians of North America, still be living
> contentedly in our forests, waging cruel wars as heroes, if the chain of
> foreign cultures had not pressed in upon us and, with the impact of cen-
> turies, had not forced us to join in . . . This chain extends from its first
> link to the last and will one day encircle perhaps the whole earth.
> (B:174)

Once again, Barnard's translation here has pluralized Herder's singular – '*die
Kette der fremder Kultur*' (Herder, 1877–1913: Vol. 5, 142).

Eric Wolf has written eloquently of the limitations of a configurational
model of cultures, and the need to recognize the connectedness of
cultures/societies if we are to understand (and perhaps then control) the
workings of the world economic system:

> The concept of the autonomous, self-regulating and self-justifying
> society and culture has trapped anthropology inside the bounds of its
> own definitions . . . It has been rightly said that anthropology is an off-
> spring of imperialism . . . The tacit anthropological supposition that
> people like these are people without history amounts to the erasure of
> 500 years of confrontation, killing, resurrection, and accommodation
> . . . Alexander Lesser asked years ago that we 'adopt as a working
> hypothesis the universality of human contact and influence', that we
> 'think of human societies – prehistoric, primitive or modern – not as
> closed systems, but as open systems', that we see them as 'inextricably
> involved with other aggregates, near and far, in weblike, netlike con-
> nections'. (Wolf, 1982: 18–19)[20]

That critique seems to me to be present already in Herder's conception of the
'chain of culture'. His conception of cultural particularity exists in tension
with a highly developed sense of the 'netlike connections' to which Wolf is
drawing our attention.

In *Culture and Equality*, a trenchant critique of multiculturalist discourse in
North America, Brian Barry argues that there is nothing absurd about the
claim that 'there is a single best way for human beings to live, allowing
whatever adjustments are necessary for different environments' (Barry, 2001:
262). Barry is speaking here in political and ethical, rather than in economic,
terms, but the whole logic of the Enlightenment conception of progress
which has been at issue in these pages is an economic as well as a political and
an ethical one: to speak clearly, globalization is entirely consistent with the
stage theories which were unleashed by 18th-century thinkers. Both Diderot
and Herder, fierce critics of slavery as of many other aspects of the colonial
enterprise, believe that global commerce will enable different peoples to

cooperate and advance towards greater well-being. In that reading, today's global economy might be nothing other than the '*Kette der Kultur*' which Herder envisaged would one day stretch across the globe. Taking Herder's theory of culture seriously, and that means looking at it in the context of his overall approach rather than using only the part which most suits our present purposes, forces us to ask whether globalization is not just a Western-led threat to dominated (victimized) cultural subjectivities, but a product of an objective process of convergence based on certain shared human drives and desires. The complexity of this question can only be touched on here. Both world system theorists like Wolf and liberals like Barry argue for a fundamental unity of process (respectively economic and ethical) across cultures. But Edward Said criticizes 'world history' precisely for its inability to see the links between its overt position, cultural and epistemological dominance ('Orientalism'), and economic and political hegemony (Said, 1986: 223–4).

It is clear, at least, that Karl J. Fink oversimplifies when he writes that Herder 'freed the anthropology of the peoples of the globe from progress ideology' (Fink, 1993: 56). Herder retains an ethical universalism which holds that it is possible to judge a culture by some standards existing outside it. He also holds on to a circumscribed notion of progress, which maintains first that one civilization builds upon another, and second that the urge to improve and perfect our life constitutes a universal spring of human action (the *Bildungstrieb*). But while he believes that this drive may indeed push human societies towards objectively similar destinations, he criticizes two related elements of the High Enlightenment vision of progress, as we find it in Turgot or Condorcet, Ferguson or Millar. The first object of Herder's critique is the arrogance which places European civilization as the implicit or explicit telos towards which all human history is seen as tending. Secondly, he rejects rigid stage theories. Claude Blanckaert has argued that the 'naturalist' model of human science which enjoys a period of dominance in France at the very end of the century is 'blind to the symbolic', because of its faith in a functionalist understanding of human action and history (Blanckaert, 2000: 133). Stage theory is one form of this functionalism, resting as it does on the notion that 'the human mind, whenever it is placed in the same situation, will, in ages the most distant, and in countries the most remote, assume the same form, and be distinguished by the same manners'.[21]

Barnard interprets Herder's view of progress intelligently. Herder believes in a human drive towards perfection and self-improvement, but this is a process which operates always in given contexts and within given constraints, which must be understood and respected historically. It is when societies are denied the opportunity to grow organically that they fail to progress. Tradition and progress are not opposites: progress must emerge out of a social and historical tradition if it is to take root, and, conversely, 'a living tradition was inconceivable without the progressive emergence of new goals' (B:44,

B:50). Herder thus offers us an understanding of the connectedness of technology and culture which is denied in modernization theory's belief that technological standardization can take place without threatening culture. *Bildung* is not just a form of 'system maintenance'; its organic nature means that the imposition of external cultural models ('instant transplants') can lead to a process of alienation (Barnard, 1988: 233–5).

I argued above that history has separated discourses which during the Enlightenment were not considered antithetical. The division between the biological and the social was one such case; another is the relationship between the universal and the particular, an antithesis upon which much of the 'Enlightenment debate' turns. Anthropology, Robert Wokler has argued, is not just a 19th-century ('Romantic') reaction to Enlightenment abstraction: its 18th-century roots have to do precisely with the realization at that time that 'the study of human nature in general and empirical investigations of savage societies in particular, form precisely the same field' (Wokler, 1995: 31). Herder's work, I have argued here, demonstrates that respect for cultural specificity does not cancel out the universalizing, transcultural thrust of concepts like progress and practices like ethical judgement. *Kultur* remains a singular noun in Herder.

NOTES

1 On the Enlightenment debate, see Schmidt (1996), Baker and Reill (2001) and Geras and Wokler (2000). Enlightenment universalism has been defended in different ways and from different points of view by Barry (2001), Geras (1995) and Benhabib (1992).
2 Isaiah Berlin notes the importance of the idea of cultural *patterns* in Herder (Berlin, 1976: 195). Herder himself uses the word *Gestalt*. The idea of cultural patterns will play an important role in the culture and personality school of anthropology in the 1940s and 1950s.
3 The standard edition of Herder's complete works in German is Herder (1877–1913). I have referred to the most readily available English selections from Herder's works: Barnard (1969), where the translations are by Barnard; and Manuel (1968), which abridges the first English translation by T. O. Churchill, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man* (London: 1800). References will be given in the text to these two works, abbreviated to B (Barnard) and M (Manuel). Here, B:182.
4 See Tajfel and Fraser (1978: chapter 17).
5 The idea of the foreign culture as an interiority to be penetrated and understood is found in a text often described as the founding manifesto of French ethnography: Gérando (1800) translated in Gérando (1969).
6 Barnard (1965: 143) points out that the political corollary of this in Herder's

thought is the belief that once state and *Volk* are brought into alignment, law will no longer need to be coercive, because of its organic linkage to culture.

7 Friedrich Meinecke in his work on historicism points to the influence of Montesquieu (Meinecke, 1972: 299–300, 316).

8 His '*Gedänke bei Lesung Montesquieus*' [Thoughts on Reading Montesquieu] are untranslated: see Herder, 1877–1913: IV, 464ff.

9 Barnard translates 'Nationalcharaktere' (Herder, 1877–1913: V, 551) as 'national cultures'. See below for further comments on the word 'culture' in Barnard's translation.

10 On similarities between Herder's and Diderot's anti-colonial discourse, and a shared ambiguity about the ethics of travel (Pagden, 1993: 157–78).

11 There are obvious echoes of Rousseau on the noble savage, or of Diderot on the happiness of the Pacific islanders before the arrival of Europeans. Ossianism, and the aestheticization–sentimentalization of peasant life, are other aspects of this same trend, which is the reverse side of the period's awareness of the speed of historical change.

12 A new translation is available (Forster, 2002: 1–38).

13 On philosophical medicine, see Vila (1998) and Denby (2003). The movement's preoccupation with the relationship between humans and their environment led to the conviction that environmental influence offers a key to social transformation.

14 For views of Buffonian natural history as a model for racial and national stereotyping, see Thomas (1994: 81ff.) and Todorov (1989: 35–6).

15 Blanckaert (1992: 588–91) has shown Buffon's debt to Locke in this area.

16 Pagden (1993: 178) appears to accept this pluralization.

17 Another example: Barnard (B:76) speaks of the morals and the religions 'of all peoples, cultures and periods'. Herder's original is '*aller Völker, Sitten und Zeiten*' (Herder, 1877–1913: IV, 365).

18 I have not been able to check how the original translator, Churchill, translated *Kultur* in Herder. Thomas Reid has a similarly unitary notion of culture, based on very strong horticultural or agricultural metaphors. See Stewart-Robertson (1982).

19 For an extended development of these positive metaphors of expansion and boundlessness, see Anarcharsis Cloots's plan for a 'Universal Republic of the Human Race', communicated to the National Convention in Paris on 26 April 1793: *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860*, first series 1787–1799, LXIII (Paris: Dupont, 1903), pp. 389–403.

20 See also Boon (1982: 15) for comments on the fact that the monograph tradition established by Malinowski tends to view societies as cultural islands, neglecting among other things relations between a particular culture and others, and that culture's own sense of others.

21 William Robertson, *History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V* (1769) (Meek, 1976: 139).

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