

Johann Herder, Early Nineteenth-Century Counter-Enlightenment, and the Common Roots of Multiculturalism and Right-Wing Populism

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Light does not nourish men.

—Johann Herder¹

I. Introduction

In *The Democratic Contradictions of Multiculturalism*, Jens-Martin Eriksen and Frederik Stjernfelt elaborate on the concept of “culturalism.” In *Telos* 163 (Summer 2013), Eriksen continues to analyze its intricacies under the heading “Culturalism: When the Culture becomes Political Ideology.”² Horizontal class divisions are out, vertical cultural barriers are in. Seemingly, culture has squeezed out all other concepts. The present essay shall broaden this discussion by asking the question: What is the relation between the Counter-Enlightenment of the early nineteenth century and today’s culturalism?

Culturalism refers to two opposite and yet surprisingly similar versions of an attitude in which one places strong emphasis on “one’s own” culture. The authors cite the right-wing Danish People’s Party as one exponent of this view. According to this party, they argue, “the period of the Enlightenment constituted the darkest hour of humankind,” while universalism and human rights are merely “an arrogant ersatz religion.” Eriksen

1. Johann Gottfried Herder, *Herders sämtliche Werke*, ed. Bernhard Suphan (Berlin: Weidmann, 1877–1913), 5:525.

2. Jens-Martin Eriksen, “Culturalism: When the Culture becomes Political Ideology,” *Telos* 163 (Summer 2013): 131–46.

and Stjernfelt note that, as a result of the cartoon crisis in 2006, the Danish People's Party was forced to embrace freedom of speech. This concession could only be made, however, by putting the label of "Danish values" on the declaration. All of this, the authors argue, amounts to "culturalism of the right."³ It is all about "us": "we" are important and fascinating; "our" perspective is penetrating; our culture is deep and majestic, and it awakens the spirit; universal declarations are words on paper and lofty cosmopolitanism. The self-perception of right-wing culturalism is myopic, pompous, and lacking in self-irony.

This culturalism of the right—closely related to "classic" nationalism and British jingoism—is mirrored by "culturalism of the left." Whereas the former cannot help succumbing to self-pity and sentimental images of its own nation, culturalism of the left is equally zealous on behalf of nations, cultures, and religions overseas. "From the left shore of culturalism," the authors argue, "we hear the culturalist battle cries about recognition of the most antimodern and distasteful religious practices"—justified with romantic verbiage reminiscent of that above: "they" are deep and "their" culture, and religion must be defended at all cost; human rights and freedom of speech are merely used in order to abuse and humiliate "the Other."⁴ The exoticists shun self-irony, and they idealize the foreign cultures into which they have sunk their personality. Whether these traits—ethnic aggression, collectivist pessimism, and lack of self-reflection—are linked to a domestic community or to a nation overseas, they are surrounded by the same culturalist mythology.

In this essay, Eriksen and Stjernfelt's idea of "culturalism" will be used in order to support three arguments. First, right-wing populism and multiculturalism share common roots in the theory of Johann Herder—poet, literary critic, and champion of the early nineteenth-century romantic backlash against the Enlightenment. "The Herderian idea of group difference," Kenan Malik argues, "gave rise to both racial and pluralist views and there remain . . . common bonds between racial and multicultural notions of human difference."⁵ Second, multiculturalism is not, as is often maintained by its critics, stained by Herder's conservatism and nationalism. It

3. Jens-Martin Eriksen and Frederik Stjernfelt, *Adskillelsens politik: multikulturalisme—ideologi og virkelighed* (Copenhagen: Lindhardt og Ringhof, 2008), p. 275.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 276.

5. Kenan Malik, "Making a Difference: Culture, Race and Social Policy," *Patterns of Prejudice* 39, no. 4 (2005): 361–78.

is the other way around: Herder's passionate calls for cultural independence are, if anything, tainted by the more hard-hitting conservatism of multiculturalism. In this sense, the authors share the hope of Zammito and others, whereby "some ill-founded opinions still circulating concerning Herder's 'irrationalism' and chauvinistic, even racist nationalism... might at last be put to rest."⁶ Third, one of Eriksen and Stjernfelt's main pillars will be challenged, as we argue that in reality there is no such thing as "culturalism of the left."

II. Multiculturalism and Right-Wing Populism: Two Branches of One Culturalist Tree

Six key ideas will be presented in support of the argument that the philosophy of Herder constitutes a shared background of right-wing populism and multiculturalism.

An important aspect of Herder's philosophy is the notion of "belonging."⁷ To be part of an ethnic group, culture, region, race, or religion is fundamentally human. Crucial to right-wing populist perspectives, likewise, is the idea of being part of something greater and more majestic than yourself. You belong and commit yourself to the glorious destiny of your own group. From the other corner of the room, multiculturalists insist that "ethnic" belonging and the fusion of "I" and "we" is paramount. Lawrence Blum notes that W. E. B. Du Bois, one of the early theorists of multiculturalism, was influenced by Herder and that Du Bois's "The Conservation of Races" and *The Souls of Black Folk* demonstrate that he shared Herder's ideas about belonging and a collective "spirit" attached to a given race or ethnicity.⁸ To both right-wing populists and multiculturalists, the community is a safe haven and a guiding principle, and they both oppose the liberal idea of self-determination. Two forms of culturalism result.

When confronted with foreign cultures and their influence on the German imagination, Herder invokes a drastic image: they devour expressions

6. John H. Zammito, Karl Menges, and Ernst A. Menze, "Johann Gottfried Herder Revisited: The Revolution in Scholarship in the Last Quarter Century," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 71, no. 4 (October 2010): 661–62.

7. Herder, *Herders sämtliche Werke*, 8:210; cf. 8:303.

8. Lawrence Blum, *I'm Not a Racist, ... But—: The Moral Quandary of Race* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2002), p. 212. See also W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Conservation of Races," in *On Sociology and the Black Community*, ed. Dan S. Green and Edwin D. Driver (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 238–49; and W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007).

of indigenous culture “like a cancer.”⁹ Here the concept of “ethno-pluralism” comes to mind. Often used by the French New Right (*la Nouvelle Droite*), ethno-pluralism is a kind of pluralism enhanced with barbed wire, seeing intrusion and colonization in anything foreign. The fear is that French culture will be thinned out and that the intruder—in a seemingly innocuous phrase—will be subject to “the brutal rites of assimilation,” resulting ultimately in a global wasteland of dying cultures.¹⁰ The only cure: absolute separation between cultural entities. Multiculturalists cling to Herder’s pessimism with no less determination. In their eyes, exotic cultures remain on the brink of extinction. Foreign (i.e., Western) influence, like a cancer, metastatically kills off one fragile culture after another. They offer (at least) two solutions. Either, as Charles Taylor suggests, societies must “take steps to ensure the survival of” any fragile culture prone to become extinct “through indefinite future generations.”¹¹ Or, this colonization may be averted by means of a complete fencing-off of their territory from the gruesome impact of Western modernity—i.e., an absolute separation between cultural entities. Whether culturalism enters from the right or from the left, it is dominated by the same romantic and collectivist rhetoric about the absolute worth of the frail and the indigenous, and about the vile nature of foreign influence and social change.

A cultural entity described thus is often seen as “organic”—a body with a thinking head and active limbs. Herder repeatedly makes use of this image.¹² Similarly, no right-wing populism will gain momentum without notions of “wholeness” and organicism. The leader (or *Führer*) is gifted with vision and speaks on behalf of the downtrodden *Volk*, gradually transforming it into a mob at the mercy of his extremist political ambitions. Multiculturalism, for its part, revolves around the ethnic community, seen as a collectivist and organic entity where reluctant but honorable community leaders are carried forth on the shoulders of silent, grateful crowds. The multiculturalist Bhikhu Parekh claims that Herder, for all his loosely structured ideas and scientific flaws, surpassed both Giambattista Vico

9. Herder, *Herders sämtliche Werke*, 25:11.

10. Richard Wolin, “Designer Fascism,” in Richard J. Golsan, ed., *Fascism’s Return: Scandal, Revision, and Ideology since 1980* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1998), p. 54.

11. Malik, “Making a Difference.”

12. Isaiah Berlin, “Herder and the Enlightenment,” in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (London: Pimlico, 1998), p. 416.

and Montesquieu “in his appreciation of the wholeness . . . of cultures.”¹³ While organicism is common in both camps, multiculturalists insist that it should be praised when they use the figure but opposed when employed in the discourse of the right. One culturalism is mirrored by the other. Save for the fact that multiculturalists have sunk their souls into minorities in the West and exotic communities overseas, they share with the far right a longing for the primitive village of organic wholeness and unspoken concord, unspoiled by the impact of dissenting voices and modernity.

“Awake, German nation! Do not let them ravish your Palladium!” Herder exclaims in an oft-cited passage.¹⁴ He sees fearful storms on the horizon and tells Germans to take warning. These images—a passive and ignorant *Volk* unaware of coming atrocities, all expressed in a poignant battle-cry—are part of the right-winger’s everyday vocabulary. If the focus is shifted from Europe to exotic cultures, the same emotionalism is expressed by multiculturalists. These foreign cultures are seen as “proud” and must be on guard against any Western influence. Right-wing populists and multiculturalists are both *völkisch*—here or elsewhere. Culturalism of the right fuses with culturalism of the left.

“The savage who loves himself, his wife and his child . . . and works for the good of his tribe as for his own . . . is in my view,” Herder maintains, “more genuine than that cultivated ghost, the . . . citizen of the world,” and those “superfluous cosmopolitans.”¹⁵ While the Middle Ages may have been full of “abominations, errors, absurdities,” it also possessed something that has been squashed by modernity—“something solid, cohesive and majestic.”¹⁶ Here, Herder is a primitivist and anti-intellectualist. Who is authentic, decent, and hardworking? The simple man. Modern life leads to confusion and alienation. Intellectual curiosity stifles the imagination, and the cosmopolitan is useless and little more than a parasite. In the eyes of the multiculturalist, modernity and all that comes with it have always been perceived with caution, because modernity means progress, the squashing of fragile ethnic groups, and the rule of the indigenious—presumably racist—all-white majority. As opposed to Western rational-mindedness, multiculturalists cherish “the Other” and see its alternative forms of life—

13. Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p. 67.

14. Herder, *Herders sämtliche Werke*, 17:309.

15. *Ibid.*, 13:339.

16. *Ibid.*, 5:527, 524.

simple and introverted—as representing a tempting postmodern challenge to Western self-haughtiness. The right-wing populist, too, has plenty of reasons to embrace Herder’s anti-intellectualism and primitivism. Idealizing the poor and the downtrodden while attacking the elite and the bookish has a clear populist ring. Right-wing populism is replete with phrases such as “talent remains unseen” and “true genius shuns worldly success.” To right-wing populists—Pia Kjersgaard, Marine Le Pen, and others—intellectuals are elitist, rootless leftists. While the Middle Ages appeals to the multicultural postmodernist due to its alleged absurdity and “jouissance,” it attracts right-wingers as a result of its supposed order and stability. The multicultural primitivist fears the straitjacket of modernity, and the right-wing primitivist abhors it due to its alleged decadence.

The most important aspect of Herder’s philosophy is, however, constituted by language. “Has a nation,” he asks, “anything more precious than the language of its fathers? In it dwells its entire world of tradition, history, religions, principles of existence; its whole heart and soul.”¹⁷ Let us not be feeble Englishmen, let us not pretend to be Spanish, let others be Spanish! “Let us be characteristic of our nation, language, scene, and let posterity decide whether or not we are classical.”¹⁸ If we lose our language, we will forget who we are: “But now! I cry yet again, my German brothers! but now! The remnants of all living folk-life . . . are rolling into the abyss of oblivion”; “We speak the words of strangers and they wean us from our own thoughts.” These are all images that resonate with right-wing ideology. Language is a fixed, no-longer-evolving key to national unity, and language becomes a means to repel foreign intruders: “Germans, speak German! Spew out the Seine’s ugly slime!”¹⁹ Ever since, this emotional outburst has caused a great stir among right-wing populists and radical nationalists. Multiculturalists, too, are tempted by these images. Charles Taylor, for instance, describes Herder as a “deeply innovative” thinker and “one of [the] pioneers” of “a more situated understanding of thinking,” “who constantly stresses that we have to understand . . . language as an integral part of our life form.”²⁰ If the multicultural enthusiasm for language wavers at home, it is all the stronger concerning nations overseas.

17. *Ibid.*, 17:58.

18. *Ibid.*, 2:57.

19. *Ibid.*, 17:129.

20. Charles Taylor, “The Importance of Herder,” in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997), pp. 79, 91.

Language—along with any other aspect of a cultural entity likely to vanish into the “abyss of oblivion” and become extinct—has always been attributed deep significance among multiculturalists, and their attitude toward the intruders (imperialists, and later merely Westerners and modernizers) remains hostile.

III. To Have or Not To Have a Mythology: Herder versus Multiculturalism and Who Is Tainted, Really?

Whether in terms of language, primitivism and anti-intellectualism, the dangers of foreign intrusion, organicism, or the virtues of belonging, Herder can be considered an ancestor of both multiculturalism and right-wing populism. Still, the relation between Herder and these modern offspring is not seamless. In the case of right-wing populism, Fritz Stern’s *The Politics of Cultural Despair* is helpful for considering the intermediary connections. In this study, Stern traces the gradual transformation of the image of the peasant throughout nineteenth-century German literature, from a figure characterized by modesty and an inward-looking nature to, as the century draws to a close, a character more resembling a beast and an anti-Semite.²¹ This shift reflects the dilemmas not only of discerning the true nature of Herder’s thought but also, more generally, the gray zone between essentially passive and forbearing conservatism and fascism. As a man who died in 1803, Herder fits into Stern’s general time frame. When Herder describes the primitive “savage who loves himself and his family” rather than vainly embracing the entire world, the image is introverted and sentimental rather than vengeful and proto-fascist.²² This savage—an expression that might sound ominous to some—is not contrasted with feeble liberals and socialists betraying their own *Volk* but with the discontented and restless globalizer. Herder’s savage is passive rather than opposed to those who are passive; more of a Rousseauian primitive man, pristine and unspoiled, than a sociobiological carnivore. Herder’s images of a simple life never catch fire.

Another difference has to do with Herder’s opinion about excessive nationalist pride. “To brag about one’s country,” Herder maintains, “is the stupidest form of boastfulness.” He continues: “What is a nation? A great

21. Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1974).

22. Herder, *Herders sämtliche Werke*, 13:339.

wild garden full of bad plants and good; vices and follies mingle with virtues and merit.”²³ His sentimental mind-set, with a concomitant hesitancy toward abrupt social change, makes him, Isaiah Berlin claims, opposed to imperialism of any kind, or as Berlin puts it, to “the crushing of one community by another, the elimination of local cultures trampled under the jackboot of some conqueror.”²⁴ Herder insists on self-determination not only for “us” but as a principle. He sides with *l’uomo qualunque*—the man on the street—against authority, lofty intellectualism, and vain utopian aspirations. Why should the poor and the downtrodden suffer in the trenches “to satisfy the whim of a crowned madman, or the dreams bred by the fancy of a *philosophe*”?²⁵ Although Herder’s writings resonate with holistic images, they never fuse into a nation as a beast. His theory, it is claimed, “entails no mythology.”²⁶

A right-wing populist shows little concern for other cultures. His compassion and interest are focused on his own nation, culture, and religion. Herder, for his part, is adamant that “empathy” with foreign cultures is crucial. We must try to understand them “from within.”²⁷ Not only does this example point toward another discrepancy between Herder and right-wing populism; it also shows Herder as somewhat of an early multiculturalist. Multiculturalists, it is often claimed, go beyond merely being interested in other cultures. They show an “active interest” in and seek to obtain the perspective of the stranger.²⁸ This relativistic and abstract enthusiasm—characterized by calls to “cherish,” “celebrate,” “foster,” and hail the unknown—has a lot in common with Herder’s call more than two hundred years ago for sympathetic insight and seeing the world through the eyes of “the Other.”

But, then, *is* Herder closely affiliated with multiculturalism? In the eyes of many of multiculturalism’s critics, the answer is yes. Patrick West, for instance, labels Herder an early exponent of “hard multiculturalism.”²⁹ According to this perspective, Herder is a red flag: a mythical figure casting his dark, proto-fascist shadow over multiculturalism. On one central

23. *Ibid.*, 17:211.

24. Berlin, “Herder and the Enlightenment,” p. 373.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, p. 416.

27. Herder, *Herders sämtliche Werke*, 10:14.

28. Eriksen and Stjernfelt, *Adskillelsens politik*, p. 344.

29. Patrick West, *The Poverty of Multiculturalism* (London: Civitas, 2005), pp. 8, 10.

point, however, Herder and multiculturalism differ. It was previously claimed that Herder's theory does not entail any mythology—the collectivist ogre never gets on his feet. Groups are ultimately made up by individuals, who invariably, it is worth adding, partake in the great cultural project of *Volksgeist*—the distinctive soul of a particular people: “In the works of imagination and feeling, the entire soul of the nation reveals itself most freely.”³⁰ Multiculturalism, on the other hand, was always silent about individuals. There the focus is strictly on ethnic groups, cultures, or religions. Multicultural self-esteem and “ethnic pride” seem, moreover, conspicuously disentangled from the practical efforts of culturally creative individuals. “Ethnic pride,” a cynic would say, does not come with artistic achievements but with their absence and, indeed, suppression. From the vantage point of the individual, multiculturalism is not stained by Herder; Herder is rather tainted by the ruthlessly collectivist, myth-ridden implications of multiculturalism.

A further aspect that appears conclusively to dissociate Herder from both right-wing populism and multiculturalism has to do with a distinctly modernist strain in his philosophy. “The Negro,” says Herder, “is as much entitled to think the white man degenerate . . . as the white man is to think of the Negro as a black beast.” Herder's reputation for being *Germanic* and politically suspect does not quite hold ground, because he assigns the same rights from any given cultural point of reference. He continues: “The civilization of man is not that of the European; it manifests itself, according to time and place, in every people.”³¹ There is no *Favoritenvolk*. Herder defends the idea that any member of any people has the right to express derisive views about any other people. Precisely at this crossroads is where the two brands of culturalism—right-wing populism and multiculturalism—seem to falter. A black man is habitually dismissed as a beast by a right-wing populist. But the same populist will not accept the black man's entitlement to express the same views about white people. A multiculturalist, on the other hand, is more than happy to describe a white person as degenerate (including, if need be, herself) but does not allow a white person to use similar vocabulary against others. At this point, Herder stands out as a conservative and relativist, and yet a modernist and somehow also a universalist, because he opposes a *völkisch* sensibility that would entitle some to a haughty self-privileging while denying it to

30. Herder, *Herders sämtliche Werke*, 18:58.

31. *Ibid.*, 18:248–49.

others. Again, multiculturalists are not tainted by Herder. If anything, their exoticist mirror-image of eurocentrism would benefit from registering the influence of Herder's principled modernism, according to which an idea either applies for everybody or applies for nobody.

IV. Herder, Multiculturalism, and Right-Wing Populism: A Private Conservative Controversy

Still, there is a riddle here. Multiculturalists, it was argued, are often enticed by the writings of Herder and, as we have seen, often quote him. But how is this possible? Multiculturalism is said to be safely leftist, while Herder and right-wing populism, along with anything more extreme, belong to the other end of the political spectrum. Eriksen and Stjernfelt's distinction between left and right culturalism expresses the same view. But this is not about left and right. Historically, the left was not mystical or relativist but rationalist and preoccupied with factual exploitation. The battle was fought *against* "ethnicity," "roots," and "identity"—i.e., against those who claimed that shared culture would fuse the upper and lower classes. While multiculturalism is excessively romantic, idealistic, and pessimistic, the left (at least in terms of its fundamental underpinnings) never was. Rightist myths abound, while leftist ones are scarce. Eriksen and Stjernfelt's analysis is illuminating—save for the fact that there really is no culturalism of the left. The question of Herder versus multiculturalism is not an issue between left and right but a private conservative controversy. Multiculturalism fulfills all the criteria of a conservative ideology. Its exclusive focus on groups and the concomitance of the absent individual makes it, moreover, more radical than Herder's timid conservatism, in which the individual as a concrete being in time and space is central. Multiculturalism—i.e., a multitude of cultures—implies that the entity expected to shine and give color is culture. No less fierce form of conservatism would manage to idealize the ethnic community and yet turn a blind eye to its real members. Save for defending a generous immigration policy, multiculturalism has little in common with leftist views. Analytically, multiculturalism constitutes a pronounced form of conservatism in between Herder and fascism.

In this essay, three ideas have been addressed. First, multiculturalism and right-wing populism are two branches of one tree. Beneath the surface of superficial antagonism, what is called culturalism of the left shares numerous affinities with culturalism of the right. As intellectual systems of thought, they are both deeply indebted to the philosophy of the early

nineteenth-century conservative critic Johann Herder. Second, judging by its manifest anti-individualism and ethnic mystification, multiculturalism is situated in between Herder's classic, forbearing conservatism and fascism. Third, bringing out similarities between culturalism of the left and culturalism of the right obscures the fact that they are identical. As far as political philosophy goes, anyone who talks about roots is a conservative. Culturalism is always right-wing. There is no such thing as culturalism of the left.