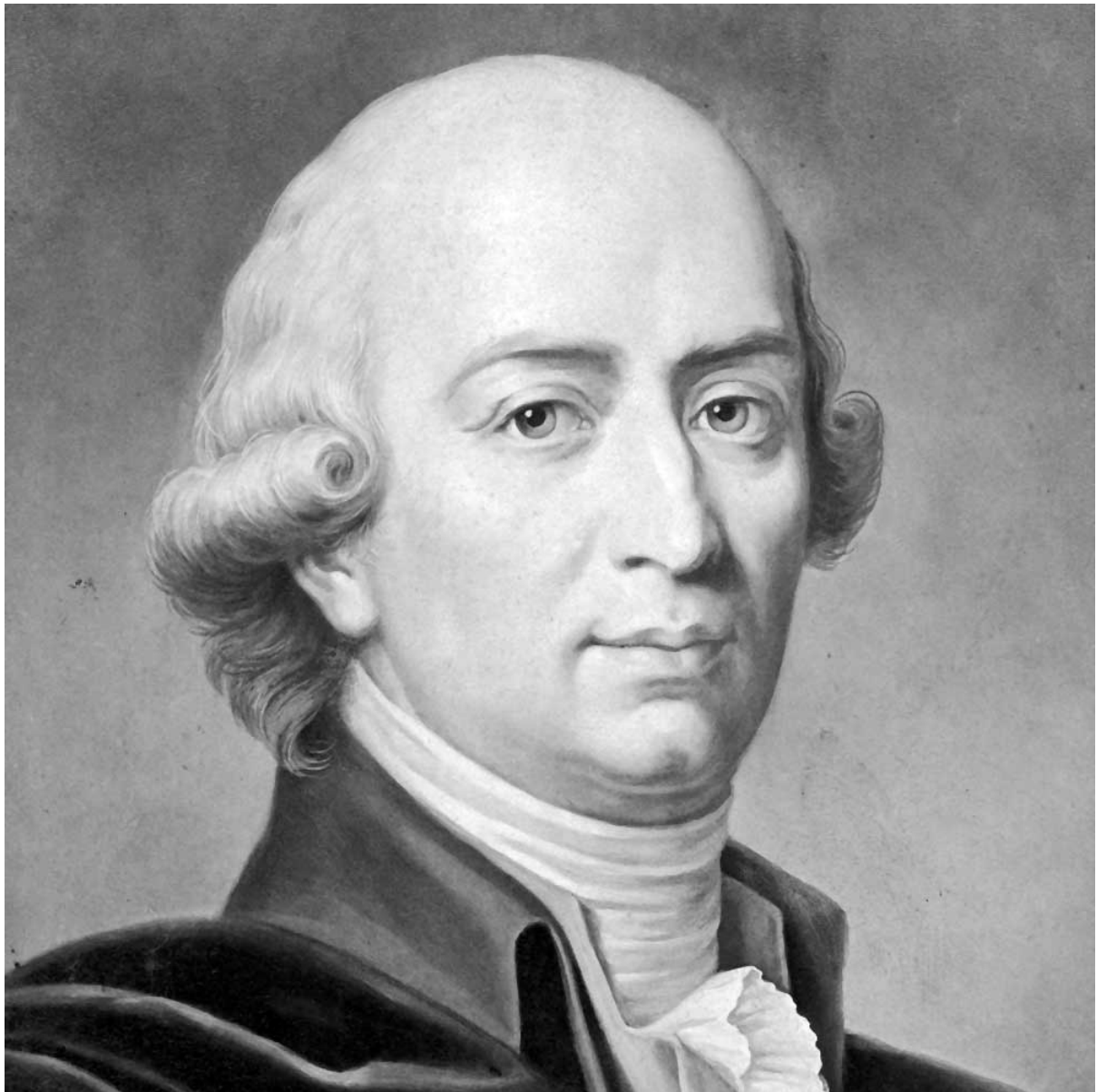


# The First Cultural Relativist: Relativism, Nationalism and the Danger of Diversity

by Alexander Zubatov (October 2016)



Johann Gottfried von Herder is not exactly a household name, and many of the few who know him may think of him chiefly as the eighteenth century philosopher who originated the nationalist conception of “the Volk” that the Nazis ran with

and turned into their notion of Aryan racial purity. Herder's view of the Jews doesn't help his cause. As he described them in his most well-known work, *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1791), "Their situation has almost ever denied them the virtues of a patriot. The people of God, whose country was once given them by Heaven itself, have been for thousands of years, nay almost from their very beginning, parasitical plants on the trunks of other nations; a race of cunning brokers, almost throughout the whole World; who, in spite of all oppression, have never been inspired with an ardent passion for their own honor, for a habitation, for a country, of their own." And more: "Their religion was pharisaical; their learning, a minute nibbling at syllables, and this confined to a single book; their patriotism, a slavish attachment to ancient laws misunderstood, as to render them ridiculous or contemptible to all neighboring nations." Yet such pronouncements, sharpened though they may be by Herder's oft-piquant, discursive prose, do not emanate from any personal animosity of the sort that drove notable anti-Semites such as Richard Wagner or Hitler himself. Herder was no proto-Nazi. His unsavory characterizations of the Jews aside, his antisemitism is of the philosophical variety. It emanates from a philosophical system, a worldview to which any concept of racial superiority of the sort championed by the Nazis is, in fact, anathema. That worldview is a thorough cultural relativism, an idea of which Herder was the first systematic proponent and which, in our times, has become mainstream dogma. The manner in which his species of relativism intersects with nationalism, a force that, of late, has re-emerged with a vengeance among us, makes Herder's ideas uniquely timely and relevant to our present-day concerns.

To be sure, some of the intuitions underlying cultural relativism were around in various forms well before Herder. The most famous doctrine of the Ancient Greek Sophist Protagoras – the great foil in Socrates' and Plato's search for universal truths – is that "man is the measure of all things," but the focus of Protagoras' relativism was not culture, but rather, the possibility of truth as such. Herodotus' presentation of events and various peoples in his *History* is thoroughly (often frustratingly and indiscriminately) non-judgmental, but he articulated no overarching belief or philosophical doctrine to ground his approach. It was perhaps Montaigne, in his essay "On Cannibals," who came the closest to a direct statement of the cultural relativist position when he wrote that "everyone gives the title of barbarism to everything that is not in use in his own country. As, indeed, we have no other level of truth and reason than the

example and idea of the opinions and customs of the place wherein we live: there is always the perfect religion, there the perfect government, there the most exact and accomplished usage of all things." But Montaigne, though a brilliant writer and essayist, was not a philosopher, not a systematic thinker, and so he could easily contradict himself later in the same essay and proceed to posit the existence of that very higher vantage point that he had earlier contended was impossible to attain – the vantage point of universal reason, above and outside all cultures – from which the cannibals at issue were indeed barbarians: "We may then call these people barbarous, in respect to the rules of reason: but not in respect to ourselves, who in all sorts of barbarity exceed them." He proceeds to offer yet another path to the same conclusion: "These nations then seem to me to be so far barbarous, as having received but very little form and fashion from art and human invention, and consequently to be not much remote from their original simplicity."

Although, as far as philosophers go, Herder – more like Schopenhauer and Nietzsche in this respect than like his own famed teacher, Immanuel Kant – was more poetic than rigorous, he, unlike Montaigne, developed elaborate and more-or-less consistent positions on many issues. He made many contributions to subfields ranging from the philosophy of language to the philosophy of religion, but the political realm was his principal focus. He reacted against Kant's universalizing impulses and doctrines, such as the categorical imperative: "After dozens of attempts, I find myself unable to comprehend how reason can be presented so universally as the single summit and purpose of all human culture, all happiness, all good," he writes in *Yet Another Philosophy of History for the Education of Humanity* (1774). One of his central theses in *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* is that virtue is local, and the virtue of one people is the vice of another: "The Bedouin and Abiponian are both happy in their condition: but the former shudders at the thought of inhabiting a town, as the latter does at the idea of being interred in a church when he dies; according to their feelings, it would be the same as if they were buried alive... Hence it is, that, throughout the whole World, the dweller in a tent considers the inhabitant of a hut as a shackled beast of burden, as a degenerate and sequestered variety of the species." Consistent with this view of things, Herder will go so far as to affirm the equality of agriculture with modes of life commonly thought to reflect earlier stages of human development: "Imagine not, that I seek to derogate from the value of a mode of living, which

providence has employed as a principal instrument for leading man to civil society: for I myself eat the bread it has produced. But 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.”

In a statement that could have come straight out of Edward Said or any of our contemporary defenders of post-colonial revisionism and multicultural identity politics, Herder writes: “It would be the most stupid vanity to imagine, that all the inhabitants of the World must be Europeans to live happily... [A]nother has as little right to constrain me to adopt his feelings, as he has power to impart to me his mode of perception, and convert his identity into mine.” “[H]ow seldom does an European hear from the native of any country the praise, ‘he is a rational man like us!’ ” Herder observes, relativizing “rationality” itself.

Such open-mindedness notwithstanding, it would be a mistake to assume that Herder does not believe in any notion of progress. We can contrast two passages that are, at first blush, irreconcilable. Here, first, is Herder, in line with what we have already seen, expressing skepticism about any notion of civilization as a lineal march up the mountain of progress: “Cultivation proceeds; yet becomes not more perfect by progress: in new places new capacities are developed; the ancient of the ancient places irrevocably pass away. Were the Romans more wise, or more happy, than the Greeks? are we more so than either?” How to explain, then, this contrasting passage:

The bloody combats of gladiators, and barbarous fights with animals, are no longer suffered among us: the human species has run through these wild tricks of youth, and learned at length to see, that its mad frolics cost more than they are worth. In like manner, we no longer require the poor oppressed slaves of the Romans, or helots of Sparta; because in our constitutions we know how to obtain more easily from free beings, what they accomplished with more danger, and even expense, by means of human animals; nay the time must come, when we shall look back with as much compassion on our inhuman traffic in Negroes, as on the ancient Roman Slaves, or Spartan helots; if not from humanity, yet from calculation. In short, we have to thank God, for having given us, with our weak fallible nature, reason, that immortal beam from his sun, the essence of which it is to dispel night, and show things in their real forms.

Here, it would appear, is a familiar bit of hypocrisy any practitioner of contemporary identity politics should be able to embrace: we can be tolerant relativists when we compare ourselves to non-European societies or when we ask whether we have any right to look down on earlier societies and yet be righteous moralists in condemning the past sins – slavery and cruelty – of our own ancestors. But, no, this is not what Herder is up to; a careful reading of his work reveals that he is simply working with a concept of progress that is unfamiliar to us today.

When a people is left to develop along its natural trajectory, uncontaminated by inordinate outside influence and unsubjected by other peoples, it progresses along a course similar to that an individual might enjoy as he or she matures from infancy into the full flower of adulthood. In contrast to the vision of a pluralistic, multi-ethnic, multi-religious state emerging from the Hobbesian/Lockean tradition (more on that later) and closer to the counter-Enlightenment tradition of thinkers such as Edmund Burke and Justus Möser (Herder and Möser, along with Goethe, had contributed essays to the same collection in the 1770s), Herder had a vision of the political state akin to Aristotle's, of the polity as an extension of the 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 public, but a monster." The people, the *Volk*, are, thus, not an artificially bounded abstraction but a natural emanation, arising out of and rooted in the very earth in which it is bred: "In the first place it is obvious why all sensual people, fashioned to their country, are so much attached to the soil, and so inseparable from it. The constitution of their body, their way of life, the pleasures and occupations to which they have been accustomed from their infancy, and the whole circle of their ideas, are climatic. Deprive them of their country, you deprive them of everything." Herder himself invokes the metaphor of rootedness: "Though the tree lift its head to the skies, and overshadow whole quarters of the Globe, if it be not rooted in the earth, a single blast of wind may overturn it."

Herder's vision of progress, then, is precisely this: he believes that certain human societies are rightly called "barbarous," but when those societies are permitted to build upon their natural foundations and evolve unhindered by

outside forces toward what Aristotle might have thought of as their "final cause," they attain their particular, distinct species of civilization: "The cultivation of its mother tongue alone can lift a nation out of a state of barbarism: and this very reason kept Europe so long barbarous; a foreign language fettering for near ten centuries the natural organs of its inhabitants, robbing them even of the remains of their monuments, and rendering a native code of laws, a native constitution, and a national history, utterly unattainable by them for so long a period." And so it is possible for Europeans, as for anyone else, to make progress, but only when they are subdivided, with each Volk evolving in its own way. This progressive trajectory, however, while elevating us above our own barbarous past, will not make us any more cultivated than other peoples, such as the Ancient Greeks, who have followed their own respective destiny so far that they stand above all other nations: "The Greeks not only remained free from any intermixture with foreign nations, so that their progress has been entirely their own; but they so perfectly filled up their period, and passed through every stage of civilization, from its slightest commencement to its completion, that no other nation can be compared with them." The seeming contradiction in Herder's view of progress from barbarism to civilization is resolved.

We are now also in position to put Herder's anti-Semitism in perspective. If the uncontaminated Greeks represent the height of civilization, then, by contrast, the Jews, those deracinated wanderers and cosmopolites who make their homes everywhere but feel at home nowhere, "were a people spoiled in their education, because they never arrived at a maturity of political cultivation of their own soil, and consequently not to any true sentiment of liberty and honor." It is clear that Herder, in our own day, would have been a fanatical Zionist: "The Bramin, the Siamese, cannot live out of his own country: and as the Jew of Moses is properly a creature of Palestine, out of Palestine there should be no Jew."

In Herder's Weltanschauung, rootlessness is the root of all evil, while a strict adherence to borders keeps each stream free-flowing through its natural channel: "[Providence] has wonderfully separated nations, not only by woods and mountains, seas and deserts, rivers and climates, but more particularly by languages, inclinations, and characters; that the work of subjugating despotism might be rendered more difficult, that all the four quarters of the Globe might not be crammed into the belly of a wooden horse," Herder proclaims. When we

engage in the pursuit of empire, we despoil other lands and peoples: "Let it not be imagined, that human art can with despotic power convert at once a foreign region into another Europe, by cutting down its forests, and cultivating its soil: for its whole living creation is conformable to it, and this is not to be changed at discretion.... 'The Americans,' says [Kalm], 'who frequently lived a hundred years and upwards before the arrival of the Europeans, now often attain scarcely half the age of their forefathers: and this, it is probable, we must not ascribe solely to the destructive use of spirits, and an alteration in their way of life, but likewise to the loss of so many odoriferous herbs, and salutary plants, which every morning and evening perfumed the air, as if the country had been a flower-garden. The winter was then more seasonable, cold, healthy, and constant: now the spring commences later, and, like the other seasons, is more variable and irregular.' "

Although others since Herder – the 19<sup>th</sup> German political theorist Friedrich List or the 20<sup>th</sup> century theoreticians of fascism and Nazism – have shared his view that each Volk, each people, deserves its own nation to itself, many of us today live in the very kinds of multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-religious societies that Herder condemns and abhors. We are the descendants of the Hobbesian-Lockean model that takes a plethora of views and ways of life as a given. Hobbes, living in a time of seemingly endless religious wars, understood that if a society is to survive such diversity without descending back into "the war of all against all" that was characteristic of his famed "state of nature," a powerful central government – the Leviathan – must have the power to limit our pluralistic extravagances, to shut us up and shut us down for the sake of maintaining peace, law, order and the common good.

We, however, have retreated far back from Hobbes' authoritarian precipice, and we have done so with especial vehemence in recent decades. We have cultivated pluralism. We have celebrated diversity. We have transformed it from what Hobbes saw as a weakness to be combatted to a strength to be exalted. In recent decades, we have moved from a model of society as a "melting pot," where individual differences are dissolved in a centrifuge that processes us and sends us back out homogenized and made more or less uniformly American (or, as the case may be, uniformly British, French and so on), to the model of the "salad bowl," in which we are taught to be proud of our differences and to put stock in our particularized labels. These labels – racial, ethnic, religious, sexual

(what Max Weber would have referred to as “status groups”) – have come to define us, have become ubiquitous boxes we check as employees, employers, applicants, students and patients, essential lenses through which we process our experience and primary resources we draw on in framing our allegiances and in hankering after economic and political benefits, social status and cultural caché. They have divided us, pitted us against one another and blinded us to more fundamental economic distinctions between rich and poor. More than ever, they are tearing us apart, creating a zero-sum society in which blacks and whites both feel like besieged victims of racism, in which Christians and Muslims both feel demonized, in which immigrants and the native-born both feel persecuted by the powers-that-be.

Hobbes and Herder offer us two contrasting poles that should orient our thoughts about the problem of diversity. The Hobbesian pole is harmony achieved at the cost of enforced integration, stifling our diversity by molding us all into good citizens of our adopted nations. The Herderian pole is harmony achieved at the cost of total separation, letting each human lineage live freely within its own borders, its nation given to it by providence. We have rejected both of these solutions. In America and much of Europe, in nations founded or re-forged under Hobbesian principles (filtered, of course, through the far more palatable Locke), housing many human families under one roof, we have strayed ever further from the Hobbesian system that makes such diversity work. We have started taking the peaceful coexistence of these many peoples for granted and directed them to be fruitful and multiply, each howsoever it may. We have stopped judging and powered down the crucible that would mold us into a single people. The result is precisely what we should have expected. The war of all against all is back with a vengeance, and the pendulum is swinging back in Herder’s direction. Nationalism, the assertion of the distinct spirit of each people, the Herderian Volksgeist, is on the rise again.

In our pluralistic societies, nationalism is an object of fear. It stirs up animal passions, leads to cleansings, crackdowns and pogroms and shatters empires. It is the fascist theorist Carl Schmitt’s drawing of the line in the sand between friends and enemies. But what if nationalism did not have to be always and everywhere a destructive force? What if a flowering of nationalism could represent an alternative path to the kinds of pluralism and diversity we as a society seem to be increasingly embracing? This is the path a



reconsideration of Herder opens to us, a positive, pacific vision of live-and-let-live. In opposition to Hobbes' negative conception of the state, tasked with keeping the war of all against all in check by deploying its machinery to prune the field and pick would-be flowers while they are still small, unopened buds, in Herder's exalted, poetic vision, so long as they stay in separate fields, a thousand flowers can bloom, each beautiful in its own way:

Thus man, from his very nature, will clash but little in his pursuits with man; his dispositions, sensations, and propensities, being so infinitely diversified, and as it were individualized. What is a matter of indifference to one man, to another is an object of desire: and then each has a world of enjoyment in himself, each a creation of his own. Nature has bestowed on this diverging species an ample space, the extensive fertile Earth, over which the most different climates and modes of life have room to spread. Here she has raised mountains, there she has placed deserts or rivers, which keep men separate... It is repugnant to the truth of history, to set up the malicious discordant disposition of men crowded together, of rival artists, opposing politicians, envious authors, for the general character of the species: the rankling wounds of these malignant thorns are unknown to the greater part of mankind; to those who breathe the free air, not the pestilential atmosphere of towns. He who maintains laws are necessary, because otherwise men would live lawlessly, takes for granted, what it is incumbent on him to prove. If men were not thronged together in close prisons, they would need no ventilators to purify the air: were not their minds inflamed by artificial madness, they would not require the restraining hand of correlative art.

Time was – not so long ago, in fact – when we as a society counterpoised the competing values of segregation and integration and recognized that integration has the moral high ground. Since then, however, we have forgotten that to integrate, we actually have to *integrate*. We have to become one people, and, regardless of what our private creeds and beliefs may be, we must, at least in public, start acting again like one nation under God, as it were, pledging allegiance to the same flag, teaching a common canon and tradition, being unafraid of taking pride in what we are, retreating from universal tolerance and agnostic relativism and affirming in their place the positive values of freedom, democracy, equality of opportunity, Western humanistic culture and the rest. And

we must be unafraid to tell those who challenge these values and traditions as oppressive exercises in hegemony that they are always free to go elsewhere.

By the look of things, we no longer appear to believe in integration. We believe instead, as I have said above, in emphasizing the superficial qualities that distinguish us from each other. This experiment in voluntary segregation is failing, pulling us all in different directions. If we have chosen to go along this dangerous path, let us take the final step. Let us save ourselves the pain of more struggle, conflict and disintegration and draw up what borders we can, leaving each racial and religious group to its own devices, so that blacks and whites, Muslims and Christians and everyone else can determine their own unique destinies, with no one but themselves to blame for any failures they should encounter along the way. Achieving such separation may be far more difficult in a globalized society than it was in Herder's day, and yet it cannot be more difficult than the schisms and tremors we are presently enduring. We should have learned this lesson by now: a house divided against itself cannot stand. A segregated society is not an option. We must integrate or separate. I continue to believe in the former, but I much prefer the latter to a balkanized society, to a republic being torn asunder, to a nation in decline.

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