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Author(s): Dominic Eggel, Andre Liebich and Deborah Mancini-Griffoli


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Was Herder a Nationalist?

Dominic Eggel, Andre Liebich, and Deborah Mancini-Griffoli

Abstract: This article re-examines Herder’s status as one of the founders of nationalism in the light of both older and more recent literature. The article focuses specifically on Herder’s position with regard to the classical nationalist thesis that state and nationality should be coterminous. It argues that a close reading of Herder’s oft cited and most explicit statement apparently lending support to this thesis has been misunderstood. The existing literature underestimates Herder’s concern regarding the question of governance. For Herder there can be no case for statehood without just governance. As earlier drafts of his work confirm, Herder was deeply critical of the states he knew and denounced their overly bureaucratic and despotic character. He thought that nations could and should exist without being states. Depending on the circumstances, however, states might fulfil temporary functions to strengthen and preserve the national character, that most essential attribute of every nation. For Herder the diversity of nations is an insurance against despotism. It is not a licence for the creation of states.

Nature brings forth families; the most natural state is thus also one people with one national character. This maintains itself in it for millennia and can, if it matters to its native prince, be developed in the most natural way: for a people is like a plant of nature; like a family, only one with several branches. Nothing is so contrary to the purpose of government, as the unnatural aggrandizement of states, the wild mixing of types of men and nations under one scepter.1

Introduction

On the face of it, the answer to the question posed in the title to this essay can only be a resounding affirmative. Herder is generally recognized as one of the key founders of nationalism. The main reason for this view is Herder’s alleged attempt to “make state and nationality co-terminous.”2 This early statement

by Robert Ergang points to the specificity of modern nationalism, authoritatively defined by the most influential author on the subject, Ernest Gellner, as "primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent." In a sense, for Gellner the state creates the nation. Gellner's thesis that nationalism connects the nation as a mode of being to the state as a category of practice is shared by those who evaluate modern nationalism very differently. Whereas ethnonationalists like Smith and Connor insist on the organic and genealogical character of nations, others like Anderson, Hobsbawm, and Gellner focus on their constructed, instrumental, and functional character. Whereas Gellner ascertains, perhaps even extols, the necessary relation between nation and state as a marker of modernity, Elie Kedourie laments it.

Despite this disaccord over the desirability of the nation-state as well as the primacy and precedence between the state and the nation, all these authors hold that modern nationalists believe the nation needs the state and vice versa. The argument of this article is that Herder did not share this belief. He could conceive of no necessary link between nation and state although he maintained that good government was essential to every people or nation, whatever its degree of sociopolitical organization. In Herder's eyes, a good government is one that strengthens and preserves the national character, a task that may require the temporary support of state institutions. In the following, we will attempt to disentangle Herder's views on the relation of good government to the nation and the state. After positioning ourselves within the current literature on Herder, we will look at Herder's concept of natural states. We will then compare these natural states to the artificial states that humankind created as history evolved. Finally, we will describe the ultimate condition of Herder's *Humanität* in which states cease to exist.

4Defined as follows by Liah Greenfield: "Nationalism in which membership in the nation is based on ancestry and believed to be an inherent characteristic." *Encyclopedia of Nationalism*, vol. 2 (San Diego: Academic Press, 2001), 1, 251.
7For the use of nation and people in Herder, see note 37.
The Varied Views of Herder

Herder is often described as the founder of nationalism, and more specifically of a genealogical and organic view of the nation tending toward ethnonationalism.\(^8\) Ergang, for example, affirms that Herder was "indubitably one of the first, if not the first, of the writers of modern Europe to develop a comprehensive philosophy of nationalism."\(^9\) Ergang's contemporary C.A. Macartney, referring to the epigraph of this article, writes more specifically that, according to Herder, every nation, understood as a Blutgemeinschaft, has the inherent right to form a state and to have it considered natural.\(^10\) A classic study of German thought reiterates this view, describing Herder, also on the basis of the passage cited here, as "perhaps the first thinker in Germany who, if he did not demand, at least implied the right of self-determination of nations."\(^11\)

Herder as a Political Nationalist

Most recent scholarship reaffirms the view of Herder as the first political nationalist in the Gellnerian sense. Paul Gilbert takes the passage quoted at the outset as a focus for his critical examination of naturalistic arguments for statehood, that is, those demanding that nations as natural divisions of mankind should define political borders. Gilbert rejects such arguments, but he identifies them with Herder's position.\(^12\) Chirot writes of the "modern Herderian view of nations as unblendable, distinct linguistic and cultural entities each deserving its own independent government."\(^13\) For Homann and Albrecht, Herder defended a cultural-linguistic paradigm of nation-state formation as opposed to a territorial-based model.\(^14\) Penrose and May affirm that for Herder political boundaries should be established

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\(^8\)Here understood as the idea that every nation defined by ethnic criteria is entitled to self-determination. For a nuanced view of Herder as precursor of a genealogic and organic view of the nation, see Elías José Palti, "The Nation as a Problem: Historians and the 'National Question,'" History and Theory 40 (2001): 325–29.

\(^9\)Ergang, Herder and the Foundations of German Nationalism, 248.


\(^11\)Reinhold Aris, History of Political Thought in Germany from 1789–1815 (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1936), 242. Admittedly, Aris muddies the waters by referring to Herder both as the "first German nationalist" and "not a German nationalist in the sense that he conceived of a united German state." Aris, History, 249, 244.


\(^14\)Harald Homann and Clemens Albrecht, "Die europäische Bedeutung des Herderschen Kulturbegriffs," in Forum für Philosophie Bad Homburg, Die Europaide
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according to preexisting cultural groupings.\textsuperscript{15} Georgiev argues that Herder was favorable to the national state (\textit{für den nationalen Staat}) and largely inspired later Slavic aspirations to self-determination.\textsuperscript{16} Finally, Schmidt-Biggemann believes that Herder's political thinking respects the three pillars of the nation-state as defined by Jellinek: territorial integrity, identity of rulers with the ruled (\textit{Herrschaftsidentität}), and unity of the people (\textit{Volkseinheit}).\textsuperscript{17} The passage quoted at the beginning of this essay seems to give ample evidence for Herder's demand that homogenous nations are entitled to have their own states.

Some, like Max Rouche, have pushed this political interpretation of Herder's nationalism to the extreme by seeing him as a \textit{"precursor of the Hitlerian theory of Blut and Boden."}\textsuperscript{18} Contemporary authors, such as Liah Greenfeld, have taken up Rouche's view of Herder as a romantic nationalist\textsuperscript{19} and an initiator of the hypothetical German Sonderweg. Greenfeld assimilates Herder into the tradition of the \textquote{idealistic Romantic patriots,} whom she connects to Hitler in a direct though not unchallenged line.\textsuperscript{20}

\textit{Herder as a Cultural Nationalist}

Such interpretations of Herder have not escaped criticism. Commentators reluctant to burden Herder with an overtly political position emphasize that culture rather than politics dominates Herder's thinking, implying that Herder did not necessarily demand the creation of states.\textsuperscript{21} Even Ergang

\textsuperscript{18}Max Rouché, \textit{La philosophie de l’histoire de Herder} (Paris: Les Belles-lettres, 1940), 91.
\textsuperscript{19}For Federick M. Barnard, romantic nationalists oddly tend to blend theories about the \textquote{all-pervasiveness of the state} with a \textquote{longing for medieval hierarchy.} \textit{Herder on Nationality, Humanity, and History} (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2003), 59.
\textsuperscript{21}When we describe cultural nationalists as \textquote{nonpolitical} in this paper, we mean that they are \textquote{non-Gellnerian} in the sense that they do not explicitly demand the
concedes that Herder’s nationalism is cultural rather than political, without abandoning the political claims he has made on Herder’s behalf.  

In any case, Herder never uses the term “nation-state” (Nationalstaat), which suggests that his views of the nation were not geared towards the state. Isaiah Berlin proposes that Herder be seen as a populist, someone who believes “in the value of belonging to a group or a culture which, for Herder, at least, is not political, and is indeed to some degree, anti-political, different from, and even opposed to, nationalism.”

Additional voices join the chorus that considers Herder a cultural nationalist. Iggers describes Herder’s nationalism as, above all, literary and aesthetic; Enno insists that Herder conceived of a nation without nationalist tendencies; and Adler argues that the nation and the state are irreconcilable concepts in Herder’s sociopolitical thinking. While claiming that Herder’s nationalism was in itself innocent and inoffensive, such authors often argue that it was later abused by either romantic nationalists or ethnonationalists. Vargas Llosa thus sees Herder as defending a dangerous kind of cultural

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22Ergang, Herder and the Foundations of German Nationalism, 239.
nationalism, and Metz considers Herder's "pre-political" nationalism to be "loaded with political dynamite."30

Pushing the line of cultural nationalism in another direction, several authors have observed anarchist tendencies in Herder and argue that he explicitly rejected the state. Enno rhetorically asks whether the critical underpinnings of book 9 of the Ideas turn nineteenth-century anarchists into plagiarists.31 Unlike Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who in Le Contrat Social expressed trust in political institutions as an acceptable alternative to an evanescent natural condition, Herder appeared deeply suspicious of the worldly state:

It is even less comprehensible that man be made for the state and society, so that his true happiness depends necessarily on institutions: for how many peoples are there who, entirely alien to any sort of political constitution, live nevertheless more happily than those who have sacrificed themselves to the happiness of the state...the danger of harming the happiness of individuals grows indefinitely, to the extent that the state grows.32

According to Beiser, Herder could thus be seen as an anarchist, since "contrary to modern nationalism [Herder] intended the nation to replace rather than to justify the centralized, bureaucratic state."33 Such authors' denial of a necessary connection between nation and state in Herder's thought stands in direct opposition to the political Gellnerian interpretations.

Intermediary Positions

Frederick Barnard and Vicki Spencer contribute a third and more nuanced strand of interpretation uniting Kohn's cultural approach with political approaches such as Ergang's. For Barnard, it makes no sense to talk of cultural nationalism since "there is no non-political form of nationalism."34 Similarly, it makes no sense for him to talk of a purely political nationalism since culture

31Enno, “Kultur,”19.
33Frederick C. Beiser, Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought. 1790–1800 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 211–12. Beiser, however, refines this claim, by insisting that Herder's anarchism should not be taken too literally since human beings were, for him, fundamentally "political animals," 213.
is “not merely relevant to politics but indispensably necessary.” The lines of cultural and political nationalism are thus inextricably blurred because of the infusion of the political with the cultural and vice versa.

Like Kohn, Barnard emphasizes the centrality of culture, especially language, in Herder’s view of the nation. Indeed, Barnard attributes to Herder a fundamental transformation in our understanding of the nation, a transformation that another commentator has described as “emancipatory.” Otto Dann underlines Herder’s politically audacious move to equate nation with “Volk,” a term that usually meant “vulgar masses” during Herder’s time. Thanks to Herder, the nation is no longer seen as a “group of citizens united under a common sovereign” but as a “separate natural entity whose claim to political recognition rested on the possession of a common language.”

35Barnard, Herder on Nationality, 50.
36Barnard, Herder on Nationality, 39, 51.
37Peter Hallberg, “The Nature of Collective Individuals. J.G. Herder’s Concept of Community,” History of European Ideas 25 (1999): 300. Otto Dann observes that in the German territories of the second half of the eighteenth century, a movement of patriotic emancipation was emerging: “Herder und die deutsche Bewegung,” in G. Sauder, ed., Johann Gottfried Herder. 1744–1803 (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1987), 339. Based on the emerging Bildungsschichten, this Deutsche Bewegung integrated love for the patria, republicanism, and constitutional rights. Although this movement shared similar objectives, it found expression in very different ways: regional patriotism, Karl von Moser’s Reichspatriotismus, Thomas Abbt’s Prussian patriotism, or Klopstock’s Deutsche Gelehrtenrepublik: Ernst Schulin, “Weltbürgertum und deutscher Volksgeist. Die romantische Nationalisierung im frühen neunzehnten Jahrhundert,” in Bernd Martin, ed., Deutschland in Europa (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1992), 111–13. Patriotism was thus no longer geared exclusively towards small republics, nor was it necessarily associated, as Herder wished, with the German nation as a whole. Patriotism, at the time, was thus more of an overall attitude and adherence to a set of values than an exclusive nationalism or narrow jingoism. Herder himself could thus have several patrias during his life: Riga, Russia, and the German nation: Otto Dann, “Herders Weg nach Deutschland,” Herder Yearbook 2 (1994): 6.
Barnard also holds that the political significance of Herder's ideas is unmistakable. Herder's emphasis on culture transformed the base of legitimacy for the state from political allegiance to ethnic and social ties; nevertheless, Herder upheld the principle that "the only state was to be the nation-State." In *Herder on Nationality, Humanity and History*, Barnard confirms that Herder is widely credited (or charged) with the idea that "a shared consciousness of cultural identity based on a common language constitutes a valid, if not compelling, reason for claiming the right to political self-government" and that this position has become "a familiar theme in claims for separate statehood." Barnard explicitly states that he does not want to challenge this view but merely qualify it. Herder's political vision should thus be seen as "an intriguing complement to Rousseau's doctrine of participatory politics."

Spencer takes up Barnard's intermediary position that "unified cultural communities form natural divisions among people from which sociopolitical associations emerge as an expression of their culture." For Spencer, however, Herder's nation is in no way dependent upon the state, and she elaborates further possibilities for the concrete expression of political self-determination at "an intermediary level between the individual and the state," such as autonomy status or minority rights. Whether or not self-determination takes the "form of a modern state" thus entirely depends upon "historical and cultural circumstances."

Furthermore, Spencer also takes issue with the position that only nations can claim self-determination since "Herder's concept of Volk applies to a

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40Barnard, 59. In fact, Barnard's reference to Herder's "nation-state" is unwarranted since Herder himself never used the term. See reference to Koepke, note 24 above. In *Herder on Nationality, Humanity and History*, Barnard qualifies this view by conceding that self-determination may find expression in "variants of political pluralism that opt for 'polyarchy' and decentralized autonomies in place of a single focus of power" (5,154).

41Barnard, *Herder on Nationality, Humanity, and History*, 17.


43Barnard, 65.

44Spencer, "Herder and Nationalism," 7.


46Spencer, "Difference and Unity," 303.

far wider range of communities,” including tribes and immigrant minorities.\textsuperscript{48}

In the following, we propose to nuance these two intermediary positions, emphasizing the transitory role of states and the various specific functions they fulfill in Herder’s progression of history towards \textit{Humanität}.

\section*{Herder’s Natural State and the Importance of Good Government}

In this section we propose to unravel Herder’s views on the relations between nation and good governance in what Herder calls the “natural state.” We will do so by way of a close reading of one of the key passages of his main work, Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Humankind (\textit{Ideas}) and with an analysis of his praise for the Hebraic constitution in the \textit{Spirit of Hebrew Poetry}. This exercise is all the more justified as Herder admitted that the chapter of the Ideas, in which the passage quoted at the outset of this essay appears, had caused him enormous difficulty.\textsuperscript{49} In fact, he redrafted the chapter five times.\textsuperscript{50}

Governance is as central to Herder’s political thought as is the composition of the population living under this government. A draft variant of the passage cited at the outset confirms this.\textsuperscript{51} To be sure, Herder would not subscribe fully to Alexander Pope’s, “whatever is best administered is best.” Nevertheless, however strong the claims of the nation, they can never over-ride the injunction of good governance. Not nationhood but governance is also Herder’s main concern in the chapter in which the foundational passage quoted in the epigraph to this essay appears. The title reads: “Governments are firmly established orders among men, mostly of a hereditary tradition.”\textsuperscript{52} The opening premise of this chapter is that “the natural condition of man is the condition of society,” meaning that in the state of nature, human communities already possess natural governing structures and laws.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{48}Spencer, “Herder and Nationalism,” 7.
\textsuperscript{49}Herder, \textit{Ideen, Sämtliche Werke}, 13: 1, 275.
\textsuperscript{50}Available are only drafts 1–3 and the final version; the fourth draft is lost. See Herder, “Ideen,” 13, 375.
\textsuperscript{51}The draft reads: “The most natural state is therefore a particular (eignes) people with national character, that either administers all its public affairs by mandate (\textit{Auftrag}) or that has a native-born prince who reigns not through a hereditary contract (\textit{Erbvertrag}) but, as all Christian rulers say, by the grace of God.” Herder thus stresses that the natural state is not that of one Volk, but that of one Volk governed by a mandated leader.
\textsuperscript{53}Herder, \textit{Ideen, Sämtliche Werke}, 13: 375. Barnard is thus right to point out that “Following Hume he [Herder] denies both a pre-political state of nature and the
The first order of such natural government is founded on fellow feeling. This involves the “order of the family, without which humankind cannot survive”; but it is not limited to the family. It also includes the “friend” and the “lover” and the “care-giver.” This first order of government is the natural foundation on which understanding or needs (Verstand or Bedürfnis) build “loftier,” though less perfect, structures. These appear as a second order, when tribes or clans discover that they have common interests or requirements. At that point, they enter into participative or cooperative relations founded on treaty and on mandate. The tribes choose their leaders freely based on merit for the duration of the tasks that have been assigned.

The best illustration for such a happy form of premodern social organization as a form of Schicksalsgemeinschaft, uniting several tribes under common rules and customs, is to be found in the Mosaic constitution. In the Briefe formation of civil society on the basis of a social contract”: J. G. Herder on Social and Political Culture, 45. Consider also the following passage from Herder’s Vom Einfluss der Regierung auf die Wissenschaften (1780): “The human race has never been without government; it is as natural to it as its origin and as the grouping together of its members within families. As soon as there is a family there is a form of government. Even peoples without developed sciences have governments, albeit imperfect ones….” Herder, Sämtliche Werke, 9: 313. Translation is from Barnard, J.G. Herder on Social and Political Culture 229. In the “Ideen,” Herder emphatically and extensively rejects Hobbes’s conception of the state of nature as a world of wolves: Sämtliche Werke, 13, 319–21.

das Studium der Theologie betreffend, Herder describes the Hebrews as the "most excellent example" of a Volk with a genuine national character.\(^{57}\) The Hebrews do not necessarily speak the same language, and they lack ethnic unity because they are grouped in several tribes, clans, and families. Nevertheless, Herder affirms that among the Hebrews "all tribes [are] One people (Volk)."\(^{58}\) They are held together by bonds of brotherhood reinforced by a common belief: "All the tribes [are] ranged under their princes, and every family under its head: so that all the fraternal members [are] connected together, until the tribunal judge[s] them all in Jehova's name."\(^{59}\) The national character of the Hebrews expresses itself in a combination of elements: common poetry and chants, possession of a common territory, the belonging to families or clans, and the reverence for the forefathers. As an important additional element, the Hebrew national character comprises a common law to which the Hebrews freely agreed and which is inspired by God. This constitution, bestowed upon the Hebrews by Moses, legally and spiritually integrates the Hebrews.

Herder calls Moses one of the most righteous lawgivers of history\(^{60}\) because his institutions "had for [their] purpose the formation of a free people (Volk), subject to none but the law; and that no one might deprive them of their liberty, God was Himself the giver of the law, its guardian, and the king of His people."\(^{61}\) Herder called this system a theocracy or nomocracy.\(^{62}\) The Mosaic laws safeguarded tribal honor, equal national rights, and freedoms (Stammeslehre, gleiche Nationalrechte, Freiheiten).\(^{63}\) They established national traditions and rites such as the regular national assemblies designed for the people (Volk) to "rejoice together and feel itself as One divine people (Ein Gottesvolk)" when citing national poetry.\(^{64}\) Instructed and highly respected priests safeguarded the constitution. In case of violation, sacrifices served as a form of judicial punishment.\(^{65}\) Political and religious affairs were inextricably interwoven because the Hebrews adhered to the laws of the state as they adhered to a divine order.\(^{66}\) Such laws reinforced the national

\(^{57}\) Herder, Briefe das Studium der Theologie betreffend (1785), Sämtliche Werke, 10: 139–41.

\(^{58}\) Herder, Vom Geiste der Ebräischen Poesie (1783), Sämtliche Werke, 12: 82.

\(^{59}\) Herder, Vom Geiste, 12: 82.

\(^{60}\) Herder, Vom Geiste, 11: 450.

\(^{61}\) Herder, Vom Geiste, 12: 82.

\(^{62}\) Herder hesitated between the two terms, but he eventually preferred theocracy: "If not theocracy so let us name it nomocracy; but for the poetry that emerged from it, according to the truth of those old times and history, theocracy is a much more expressive and beautiful word." Herder, Vom Geist, 12: 82.

\(^{63}\) Herder, Vom Geiste, 12: 82.

\(^{64}\) Herder, Vom Geiste, 12: 82–87.

\(^{65}\) Herder, Vom Geiste, 12: 91–98.

\(^{66}\) Herder, Vom Geiste, 12: 87–91.
character of the Hebrews while their national character reaffirmed their adherence to these laws. This is one version of Herder’s most natural state with one people having one national character.

In Herder’s best of all worlds, the composition of population and the form of government are, thus, inseparable and mutually shape each other. Humans who share feelings of affection and compassion for each other live together peacefully without external political bodies as do members of an extended family or a close circle of friends: “In the bosom of love and nurtured at its breast man is brought up by humans and receives from them a thousand favours which he did not deserve. In this way, he is truly formed for society.”67 On the other hand, these fellow feelings foster the establishment of institutions that safeguard and enhance the sympathy and affinity among the population. Thus, Herder clearly saw a natural and reciprocal link between nation and government.

Good government is defined by Herder as the pursuit of “national happiness” (Nationalglückseligkeit)68 and “general welfare” (allgemeine Wohlfart),69 as well as concern for the “well-being of people” (Wohlsein der Menschen).70 It has to be based on written or unwritten laws, ensure basic security and liberty, and prohibit blind arbitrariness.71 Most important, good government must be synchronous and in constant interaction with the national character.

To understand the importance of the national character and its role in harmonious integration of the individual and the collective,72 we first have to understand the meaning of national character. Even the most fleeting acquaintance with Herder’s writings or the literature on Herder readily leads one to the conclusion that national character is closely related to language. As Herder puts it in a famous citation, “Does a people, and even more so an uncivilised people, have anything more precious than the language of its fathers?”73 To stress the importance of language even more, he adds: “Language is the bond of souls, the tool of education, the instrument of our highest pleasures, indeed of all social relations.”74

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69Herder, Idee zum ersten patriotischen Institut für den Allgemeineigts Deutschland (1788), Sämtliche Werke, 16: 600.
70Herder, Ideen, Sämtliche Werke, 14: 248.
73Herder, Briefe zu, Sämtliche Werke, 17: 58.
74Herder, Ueber die Fähigkeit zu sprechen und zu hören (1795), Sämtliche Werke, 18: 384.
Notwithstanding Herder’s lyrical emphasis on the significance of language, it should be pointed out that Herder neither equates language with national character nor national character with language: “Just as entire nations possess a single language of their own, they also have certain favorite modes of fantasy, certain detours and objects of their thought, in short a genius which expresses itself, outside individual diversities, in the favourite works of their spirit and their heart.” As Herder puts it, this is “what is commonly called national character.” In short, a language may be a basis of a national character but the two do not necessarily coincide. One can conceive of a people which possess a language but no national character—Herder cites Austria under Joseph II as an example—or of a national character founded on factors other than language as illustrated for Herder by the Hebrews.

Good government imperatively has to take into account the national character but is not tied to any specific political constitution. Herder strongly opposes Montesquieu’s a priori discussion of the ideal types of governments and their corresponding principles. Herder writes in the Ideas that “it is contrary to the nature of the matter and to history to establish forms of government according to abstract principle.” According to Herder, “the names of forms of government are, at least in the more artificial states, the [most fickle things—erased in the draft] most treacherous shadows of the world.” In contrast to Montesquieu’s universalist typology of government or Aristotle’s ideal of the mixed constitution, Herder inclines towards a vision of government that is irregular and spontaneous. Although his preference—at least if we if we look at the eschaton of his philosophy of history—remains with republican forms of government. Herder’s concept

75Herder, Briefe zu, Sämtliche Werke, 18: 58.
76Herder, Briefe zu, 17: 46–63.
77In his essay “Haben wir noch jetzt das Publikum und Vaterland der Alten?” attached to letter 58 of the Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität, Herder argues that Hebrew patriotism survived independently of Israel’s demise: “Thus, the high and far-reaching sound of patriotism in the Hebrew psalms and prophets. Where and in whatever language its echo may resound: it seizes the hearts. . . . Also since Israel has been dispersed among all nations [Nationen], this prophetic sound of a national audience has not faded.” Herder, Sämtliche Werke, 17: 286.
78In De l’esprit des lois, Montesquieu describes the universal existence of three forms of government: republican, monarchic, and despotic. Each of these forms is associated with a general principle according to which it functions: republican governments are based on the principle of virtue, monarchies on honor, and despotsisms on fear. Montesquieu, De l’esprit des lois [1748] (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1961), 11, 23–33.
81For Herder’s sympathetic attitude towards republics, see Barnard, J. G. Herder on Social and Political Culture, 47; viz. also Max Caisson, “Lumiére de Herder,” Terrain 17
of government is a dynamic or evolutionary one, consistent with his overall historicist framework.82

In the bulk of the chapter from which the excerpt is taken, Herder fulminates against the absurdity of the third degree of government, that of hereditary office. This institution has been introduced by war and by the law of the strongest.83 Its pernicious consequences are listed in detail. Since the time of Egypt and Assyria, no state has established its form of government without coercion.84 This is perfectly contrary to nature because nature has not designated a lord for the human species. But once men let down their guard, by putting into the hands of their fathers, judges, or chiefs a hereditary sceptre, they became like flocks of sheep obeying the shepherd.85 Despotism and servitude corrupt relations among men. Just as Rousseau deplores the inequality introduced and nurtured by civil society, Herder laments that human societies have lost the first and second order of government because of the aberration of hereditary rule and despotism. Rousseau's and Herder's solutions to this deplorable state of affairs are, however, radically different. Whereas, as mentioned above, Rousseau introduces his Contrat Social as a rational a priori solution based on a permanent state ensuring equality among citoyens, Herder prefers to focus on a palingenesis of the nations to which temporary and artificial states may actively contribute.

Herder's Artificial State and Its Functions

Of course, had we never left the first and second order of government, the familial and tribal paternalism described earlier may well have sufficed for human communal life. But since history evolved otherwise and nascent modernization (and globalization) was only going to put more pressure on already strained nations, Herder was ready to concede that even artificial states with a wider range of institutions may be temporarily useful tools of government.

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82 The importance of Herder's historicism as far as his conception of government and state is concerned can hardly be overstated. In Vom Einfluss der Regierung auf die Wissenschaften, Herder insists, for example, that no lawgiver could magically bring forth a new Rome or Athens if conditions were not ripe, Sämtliche Werke, 9: 376.


84 Herder, Ideen, 13: 378.

The Artificial State as Enlarged Government

In the natural state, described in the preceding section, state was nearly synonymous with government and nation. This relation of quasi-identity among nation, government, and state was possible in early organic communities where everything was still “so narrowly National.” In Ancient Greece, Herder observes, “each people felt like one separate state-body” (Staatskörper).

But states, these “late-comers” (Spätlinge), are also “children of their times” (Kinder der Zeiten), products of complex structural processes, including wars, trade, migrations, and technological innovations. Not only did Herder have to deal with hereditary monarchies that had grown out of feudality, but also with inflated multinational empires that were the legacy of wars and conquest. To make things worse, mechanization and growing division of labor were pushing everything, including states, into a bigger dimension. Herder laments the times of Solon and Lycurgus when “the affairs of state . . . were still so simple.”

Herder’s ambiguity with regard to the modern artificial state is, in large part, due to his skeptical attitude towards technical innovation and economic modernization. Even though Dreitzel is right to argue that Herder ignored or refused to discuss many of the economic and


88Herder, Ideen, Sämtliche Werke, 14: 118.

89Herder, Ideen, 13: 342.

90Herder, Zerstreute Blätter (1792), Sämtliche Werke, 16: 125.

91Viz. also Beiser, Enlightenment, 189; Penrose and May, “Herder’s Concept,” 173; and Hannemann, “Kulturelle,” 181.


94For an in depth analysis of Herder’s position with regards to these issues, see Wilfried Malsch, “Herders ambivalent Zivilisationskritik an Aufklärung und technischem Fortschritt,” in Kurt Mueller-Vollmer K., ed., Herder Today: Contributions from the International Herder Conference Nov 5–8, Stanford (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), 64–84.
structural changes taking place under his eyes, he, nevertheless, was aware of their growing social impact: “The more people act together in societies and the more the mass of their rational faculties, their inventions and efficiency multiply, the bigger the denominator and the smaller the numerator for the individual.” The relation of identity between nation, state, and government that Herder hailed so enthusiastically in the natural state had thus fallen prey to historical evolution and modernization.

Herder admits the growing need of organization for societies by defining the state as “a fraction of the human race, organized into a certain form (Gestalt), denominated by a name. Since it is not the name that is essential, the form (Gestalt) of the whole (des Ganzen) has to be organized, or, following the irreversible evolution of nature, has to organize itself ever more.” However skeptical his attitude, Herder pragmatically admitted that in the Europe of his own time, one could not dispose with artificial states and their administrations. The individual, for the time being, could only continue to exist as “a contributing and living member of the state.”

Herder conceives of artificial states mainly in terms of administrative tools of governance. Such a simple conception of the state, as essentially an enlarged form of government, stems in part from Herder’s lack of sympathy or engagement with political theories of the state. Herder hardly ever mentions or discusses Bodin’s and Hobbes’s theories of sovereignty, Montesquieu’s separation of powers, natural law’s individual universal rights, or liberal claims for civil society and the separation of the private and the public. Neither does Herder show much interest for economic conceptions of the state, despite the debates that were raging at the time between mercantilists and physiocrats and the growing statistical research provided by the

96Herder, Briefe zu, Sämtliche Werke, 18: 309 (draft version).
97Hannemann, 183.
98Herder, Briefe zu, Werke, 18, 309 (draft version), emphasis is Herder’s. Viz. also Herder’s following statement in Vom Einfluss: “It seems indeed that the new states are gaining in strength and duration, what they are losing in quick blossom,” Sämtliche Werke, 9: 375.
100Herder, Briefe zu, Sämtliche Werke, 18: 309 (draft version).
Kameralwissenschaften. Herder vigorously rejects Mandeville’s conception of a state based on individual interests and utilitarianism. Herder asks rhetorically, “What monster would such a state be, not only full of rogues but completely based on devilry?” No more than an “ant-hill,” a concert of discordant voices, “a Fata Morgana” and “a horrible dream!”

Nature extends the bonds of society only to the family. Thereafter, it leaves humankind the liberty of setting itself up, of building that work of art, the state. As human institutions are mainly of an artificial nature, states—these most complicated of instruments—may thus also be good or bad. Artificial states, just like natural ones, have to be judged according to criteria of good governance such as outlined above.

Bad States

Among the bad states rejected by Herder, we find hereditary governments, despotisms, and all those based on force. Although Herder maintains that all forms of government may turn out to be despotic, he particularly despises hereditary monarchy, rule of the plebs (Pobel) and Kakistokratismus (aristocratic despotism). In *Auch eine Philosophie zur Geschichte der Bildung der...*
Menschheit (1774), Herder traces despotism back to Oriental paternal-despotism (Orientalischen Vaterdespotismus), “Egyptian estates” and “Phoenician aristocracies.”

The problem with such states is that they do not consider human beings as ends but as means. To make it worse, deserts and tyrants ignore the rules of good government since they abuse the state as a tool of exploitation to realize their own fancies. Herder regarded the professionalized and regimented armies of the eighteenth century as symbolic at the despotism of his time. This despotism was backed by a perverted international system wholly at its mercy and could count on the support of enlightened philosophes sophistically spreading false political consciousness.

Equally, Herder vehemently opposed all states based on imperial ambitions, since such grandiloquent constructs as the Roman and Persian Empires have all crumbled under their internal contradictions. “An empire forced together, consisting of one hundred peoples and one hundred twenty provinces is an aberration, it is not a state body [Staatskörper].” That is why nature sets limits to such hegemonic ambitions and pretences to universal monarchy. “[Providence] has admirably separated peoples not only by forests and mountains . . . but especially by languages, inclinations and characters; so that the work of despotism be more difficult and so that all parts of the world not become the prey of a monster.” Herder could not conceive of a truly multinational state, as this “wild mixing of types of men and nations under one sceptre” would only bring about hubris and lack of national spirit.

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109 Herder, Auch, Sämtliche Werke, 5: 495.
110 Herder, Auch, 571.
111 Malsch, “Herders ambivalente Zivilisationskritik,” 66. Herder himself had to fear forced enrollment into the Prussian army during his youth.
112 “Does humanity in Europe possess a bigger enemy at all, than this (evil) politics of the courts in the so-called great state-system . . . ?” Herder, Briefe zu, Sämtliche Werke, 17: 46 (Herder’s emphasis).
114 Herder, Ideen, Sämtliche Werke, 14: 52.
115 Herder, Ideen, 13: 341. Literally: “end up in the stomach of a wooden horse.” The image of a state resembling a wooden or Trojan horse occurs several times in Herder’s writings. It illustrates Herder’s thought that empires, which are forced together out of several peoples without one national character, are despotic states. Such empires will always try to conquer more peoples before they eventually fall apart. See, for example, Herder, Ideen, 13: 385.
116 Rouché is indeed right to point out that, in this respect, Herder thought too much of Alexander the Great and not enough of the Swiss republics: La philosophie de l’histoire de Herder, 301.
Finally, Herder condemned all those states that tended to overdevelop their bureaucracies and pursued ambitious policies of centralization. In an almost liberal fashion, Herder asks for “lighter” and “better” public administrations and fears that a law introducing a “crime against the state” would open the door to all kinds of abuses. From that perspective, he mainly criticized Frederick II and Joseph II for their ambitious projects of modernization and reforms.

Herder chastised Joseph II for seeking to homogenize administrative language in the Austrian empire, but luckily, nature here, too, had imposed its safeguards: “What do we learn from these different and unavoidable dialects that cover the globe in indescribable number and proximity? We learn that the thought of our common mother was not to unite all her children in one mass but to let them spread freely. No tree should, as much as possible, take away air from the other . . . .” Even the multiplicity of languages does not serve primarily to define the borders of separate states but rather ensures that multiple states will not amalgamate. Inasmuch as Herder is par excellence the advocate of diversity, one might well ask why he would advocate that states be monocultural: “After all, just as God tolerates all languages of this world, so too should a ruler tolerate, nay treasure, the diverse languages of his subject nations.”

In sum, states degenerate when their system of governance slips to forceful rule, be it hereditary, despotic, or imperial, and when it becomes heavily bureaucratic and over-centralized.

**Good States**

When well governed, states could be part of the necessary cure against challenges such as migration, wars, and modernization that the European nations of Herder’s time were facing and that threatened the very existence of their national characters. Herder recognizes that these states could have useful formative, moral, defensive, educative, and integrative functions.

**Formative function.** As Herder’s praise of the Greek states of antiquity attests, he certainly attributed to the state a formative mission in the case of young nations: “[I]t is evident that the specifically Greek sciences and arts, unsurpassed by those of any other age or peoples after more than two thousand years, have been daughters of Greek legislation, Greek political institutions . . . .” Herder, however, does not only admire the

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120 Frederick M. Barnard, *J. G. Herder on Social and Political Culture*, 58.
freedom of democratic Athens but also the patriotism of authoritarian Sparta.\textsuperscript{123} He praises the Spartan funeral inscription at Thermopylae\textsuperscript{124} and affirms that moral laws (Sittengesetz) are the foundation of all societal organizations.\textsuperscript{125} The beauty of the Greek republics was thus their combination of liberty with obedience, rights with obligations, and culture with patriotism.\textsuperscript{126}

Especially in his younger years, Herder at times dreamed of being a modern Solon, Lycurgus, or Zwingli.\textsuperscript{127} The Journal of My Travels in the Year 1769 contains one of Herder’s most explicit and detailed proposals for political reform in Riga and the rest of the Russian Empire. His intention is to transform the city’s school curriculum to educate and encourage national sentiments among young people: “All this [the new curriculum], justified with reasons of politics, with patriotic zeal, with flames of humankind and the delicacy of social manners, must cultivate, tempt and encourage . . . Oh, you Locke and Rousseau . . .! It is you I emulate; you, I want to read, contemplate, nationalise [nationalisieren] . . .”\textsuperscript{128}

\textit{Moral function.} Herder’s insistence that national prejudices (Nationalvorurtheile) are necessary and beneficial to young nations explains why Herder was inclined to attribute moral functions to the state.\textsuperscript{129} Like Fichte in Der Geschlossene Handelsstaat,\textsuperscript{130} Herder, especially in Vom Einfluss der Regierung auf die Wissenschaften,\textsuperscript{131} was sometimes willing to concede a high degree of

\textsuperscript{123}Herder, \textit{Ideen}, Sämtliche Werke, 14: 121.
\textsuperscript{124}Rouché, \textit{La philosophie}, 60. Herder, “Ideen,” 14, 121. The inscription reads: “Wanderer, tell it to Sparta, that faithful to your laws, slain we are lying here.” In his poem \textit{der Patriot}, Herder emphasizes the importance of patriotism for all states: “The citizen’s (Bürger) happiness blossoms with the state, and states blossom through patriots.”: \textit{Briefe zu, Sämtliche Werke}, 17: 24.
\textsuperscript{126}Significantly, chapter 4 of book 13 in the \textit{Ideen} is entitled: “Sitten und Staatenweisheit der Griechen” and starts with a few paragraphs on religion.
\textsuperscript{127}Dann, “Herder und die deutsche Bewegung,” 317.
\textsuperscript{128}Herder, \textit{Journal meiner Reise im Jahr 1769}, Sämtliche Werke, 4: 371. We understand “nationalise” here as meaning that Herder was to make Riga’s pupils familiar with Locke, Rousseau, and other authors mentioned in the passage.
\textsuperscript{129}Herder, \textit{Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache} (1772), Sämtliche Werke, 5: 110. Sparta is Herder’s favorite example in this respect: \textit{Vom Einfluss, Sämtliche Werke}, 9: 324.
\textsuperscript{130}J.G. Fichte, \textit{Der Geschlossene Handelsstaat} (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1979 [1800]).
\textsuperscript{131}This prize-winning essay has to be treated with caution since it was written for the Prussian Academy. Herder might, thus, have been particularly attentive to the issue of censorship. For Herder’s more liberal opinion on the issue see \textit{Briefe zu, Sämtliche Werke}, 17: 306–7.
social control and engineering to states. Herder even suggested, through preterition, state screening of travels: “As the most efficient knowledge in good and evil is imported through travels; should the government, at least with regards to the young people, remain indifferent? Should it be indifferent, which works are translated and which alien paragons are to be imitated, especially on the scene?” Herder also compares governments to gardeners and argues that it might be necessary to prohibit certain sciences, and, even in republics, to forbid certain plays. He even justifies the intervention of the “guiding hand of government” to prevent uncontrolled rural exodus, which makes it easier to understand Dobbeck’s claim that Herder probably was more of an autocrat than he himself was aware.

**Defensive function.** The state and its institutions have an important role to play in protecting the national character. As Herder tells us in book 15 of his Ideas: “No people, whose state is well-arranged, can disappear.” Herder chastised the Jews for not having built a strong enough state to defend themselves and preserve the Mosaic heritage. Rome was successful in its conquests because of the bad statecraft (schlechte Staatskunst) of its neighbors. In Ancient Greece, Herder writes, “[A]s the state finally sank: everything noble (alles Edle) sank with it.” The premodern tribes of America possessed the art of political organization (Staatskunst), but it was not sufficiently developed to prevent their disappearance as peoples.

In a passage clearly reminiscent of Rousseau’s Considérations sur le Gouvernement de Pologne, Herder warned the Germans that if they were not to endure the fate of the Polish nation, they ought to strengthen their national character quickly. He was almost equally upset with the Poles because, instead of holding up the fight, they sold their monarchy to the highest bidder. It was thus a moral duty (sittliche Pflicht), for each nation to cultivate its self-esteem and obey the rule of self-defense.

**Educational function.** In his own times, the French Revolution and its excesses had shown Herder that Europe’s peoples were not yet ready to

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133Herder, Vom Einfluss, 358–59.
134Herder, Vom Einfluss, 408.
136Quoted in Rouché, La philosophie, 60. Herder, Ideen, Sämtliche Werke, 14: 224.
137Rouché, La philosophie; and Herder, Ideen, Sämtliche Werke, 14: 60–61.
139Herder, Briefe zu, Sämtliche Werke, 18: 12.
140Herder, Ideen, Sämtliche Werke, 14: 223.
143Herder, Briefe zu, Sämtliche Werke, 18: 345 (draft version).
govern themselves. In France, events had shown that the rough hand of an uneducated people could not handle the complex puzzle (Knoten) of politics. And in the German territories, Herder searched in vain for the public (Publikum) and fatherland (Vaterland) of the ancients. Thus, Herder preferred to think with "regret" (Bedauern) about the uneducated masses which could so easily be led astray.

If nations were to be one day self-governed, education would have to be the anchor of their identity and teach them "Humanität" first. This was all the more true for the young and fragile German nation which needed to be fortified by a radical program of national education that Dreitzel even described as "Demopädie." The state thus had to play an important role in setting up schools, academies, and seminaries, as well as organizing them into a coherent whole and defining their curricula. As general superintendent in Weimar, Herder would attempt to implement such educational reforms with unbroken determination.

Herder insisted that education should not follow rigid patterns leading to imitation and sterility but rather stimulate self-expression and encourage people to think for themselves. That the state alone would not suffice for the much expected palingenesis of nations to materialize is clear from the importance Herder attributes to the "aristo-democrats," those natural leaders emerging from the people to bring about "a reform from below." Herder was, of course, to be one of them, and the nascent Bildungsbürgertum would make up the bulk of them.

**Integrative function.** To develop and/or maintain the national Character, good states also have an integrative function and should "promote cohesion through cooperation." Herder is, therefore, opposed to states based on corporate structures (Stände) since they prevent the free deployment of individual capacities and identification with the
nation. In Herder’s own time, traditional vectors of collective identity, such as guilds, the communes, or the Holy Roman Empire, were eroding quickly, and the nation proved to be a formidable alternative form of integration.

In his *Idea for the First Patriotic Institute for the General Spirit of Germany* (1788), Herder comes astonishingly close to the Gellnerian interpretation of nationalism as a tool of national integration. For Herder, the academy should help the Germans overcome their political divisions by creating a sense of national welfare (National-Wohlfahrt) and, thus, consolidating the national character. The Patriotic Institute’s activities should center on the study of human statecraft (menschliche Staatsweisheit) and the promotion of German language, history and “everything, which is part of the active philosophy of nation-creation (Nationalbildung) and happiness (Glückseligkeit).” In this project, Herder conceives of Germany as nation, fatherland, and state, but he says little about the type of government that a united Germany should have. “The sectarian spirit” of some of the German territories (Länder), however, was to disappear.

Herder never completely renounced help from official sources and tried to come to terms with political reality as much as he could. In a poem written on the occasion of Joseph’s accession to the throne in 1780—and in sharp contrast with his later criticism of the monarch—Herder even exclaims,

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158 Herder writes, for instance, that Germany, or as he calls it “our fatherland,” was a state body [Staatskörper] that did not know how to benefit from its potential, because its leaders did not have a notion of national welfare. Herder, *Idee, Sämtliche Werke*, 16: 600–601.
159 Due to Herder’s departure to Italy shortly after he wrote the proposal and the outbreak of the French Revolution, his ideas were never implemented. Ergang, *Herder and the Foundations of German Nationalism*, 130.
161 For Herder’s love-hate relation to enlightened despotism, see Beiser, 201; Dreitzel, 287; Dobbeck, 243; and Werner Rieck, “Fast mit jedem Jahr wächst meine stille Bewunderung des grossen Mannes”—Friedrich II. im Urteil Herders,”in Martin Bollacher, ed., *Johann Gottfried Herder: Geschichte und Kultur* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1994). Herder thought that the despotic regimes of his time were irremediably evolving towards law-based monarchies. Herder, *Vom Einfluss, Sämtliche Werke*, 9: 374.
“Oh emperor! Give us what we are thirsting for:/A German fatherland/and one law and one beautiful language.”

Of course, the state is not, in Herder’s view, the main integrative factor for nations, and nowhere does he claim that nations should be created ex nihilo. Providence, history, nature, and cultural heritage are the true building blocks of nations. Herder discussed his hopes for a German renewal mainly in linguistic, literary, and cultural terms.

To what extent integration should lead to homogeneity is also a matter of debate. Barnard and Spencer have argued that diversity within cultures mattered just as much for Herder as diversity between cultures. Herder’s particularism should not, however, be overdone; he in no way intended to defend every Völkchen. So that Herder’s ideal of unity in diversity can realize the right equilibrium between the integration of national cultures, the expression of individual creativity and subcultures must be found. Herder makes this point very explicit in the Ideen: “The health and the duration of a state do not depend on the degree of civilization (Kultur) but on a wise or happy equilibrium of its living forces.” There are, therefore, limits to what even a good state could achieve.

Humanität and Self-Government

Despite all the positive functions good governments may fulfill, they remain temporary tools, or in the words of Liepert “a necessary evil” (notwendiges Uebel) and are supposed, in the end, to become redundant. This “possibility of the state becoming superfluous” (mögliches Ueberflüssigwerden des Staates) goes contrary to Rousseau’s, Kant’s, and later Hegel’s philosophies of history, and that is why the published passage under consideration at the outset of this paper caused Herder much headaches and trouble.

162 Quoted in Dann, “Herders Weg nach Deutschland,” 10.
165 Herder, Ideen, Sämtliche Werke, 14: 149 (Herder’s emphasis).
166 Liepert, “Parallelen,” 1239.
167 Liepert, 1250.
168 In the Ideen, Herder repeatedly admits that he cannot and does not want to judge Europe’s artificial states: Sämtliche Werke, 13: 340, 453 (draft version). It is no secret either that Herder stopped his Ideas short of discussing his own times. This he
In a letter to his friend Johann Georg Hamann, Herder wrote:

Some pieces of this part have caused me terrible trouble without still satisfying me; in particular the caput mortuum of the government, on which the whole wretched history [leidige Geschichte] as Herr Immanuel [Kant] and the public of universal history would have it, depends. The second version of it, after I had sent the first ad carceres I gave to our friend Göthe for ministerial censorship and he brought it to me with the comforting information that not a word of it should remain standing.169

Fundamentally, Herder is aiming his critique at his mentor, Immanuel Kant. Herder takes issue with Kant’s concept of the necessity of government that results from man’s unsocial nature. His insistence that man does not need a master is a reply to Kant’s Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Intent. In this work, Kant argues that in the state of nature, man resembles a “crooked timber” and “one cannot fashion something absolutely straight from wood which is as crooked as that of which man is made.”170 In this rough condition, men are torn between the propensity to associate or to isolate themselves, a dilemma Kant calls man’s “unsocial sociability.”171 Herder’s treatment of Kant is not completely fair since he ignores the fact that Kant’s governments are, in the end, self-imposed and rationally chosen. Herder’s rejection of Kant’s theory is clear when he writes: “[I]t is wrong and misleading to state that man as man is in need of a master. The people [Volk] needs a master as long as it does not possess its own reason: the more it receives this [its reason] and knows how to govern itself the more the government has to weaken or finally disappear.”172

In contrast to Kant, Herder emphasizes man’s natural sociability.173 As history unfolds, the need for coercive government diminishes. After all, “A father who brings up his children in a manner which keeps them under age

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171Kant, Idee, 325. Kant’s fourth principle reads: “The means which nature employs to accomplish the development of all faculties is the antagonism of men in society, since this antagonism becomes, in the end, the cause of a lawful order of this society. I mean by antagonism the unsocial sociability of men.”
for the rest of their lives and hence in need of a tutor or a guardian, is rightly considered a bad father. . . .” 174 Educated nations with strong national characters are able to live on their own, with no need of tutelage of the state. Reaching this stage of maturity, nations shed the protective shells of prejudice that protected them in their youth. 175 Having acquired a strong self-identity, nations displaying “refined patriotism” (geläuterter Patriotismus), 176 are thus able to pacifically coexist and engage in beneficial cultural dialogues with other nations. 177

This is, of course, Herder’s own peculiar way of reconciling Enlightenment cosmopolitism and emerging national consciousness. 178 With more and more nations achieving such a happy condition, we get closer to the fulfilment of Humanität, mankind’s telos. 179 At the end of history, we do not find states or nation-states but nations. In Herder’s metaphorical words, “I was in the assembly of the most thriving (blühenden) people on earth. All were standing peacefully next to each other; . . . Not one envied, pursued the other; under the blue arch of the wide sky all were enjoying the golden light of the sun, the strengthening balsam of the quickening air.” 180

One question remains. How would those free and emancipated nations govern themselves? The key words seem to be “self-government” and “invisible self-rule,” 181 good government having no longer to be assumed by

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176 In Herder’s words: “National pride is inconsistent, ridiculous and harmful. But love for one’s nation is everyone’s duty.” “Welchen Rang die deutsche Nation unter den gebildeten Völkern Europens einnehme?” (draft), Sämtliche Werke, 32: 519.
177 “Only through free competition with others do we learn to know and use our forces; the human race only lives and thrives in active and mutual community.” Briefe zu, Sämtliche Werke, 18: 310 (draft version). Enno thus compares Herder’s nations to “monads with windows,” “Kultur als höhere Natur,” 21.
179 Defined by Herder as “the spirit which ties humans to humans, peoples to peoples, i.e. the great law of justice, equity and love is the spirit of nature, rule of reason, revealed tendency of all human association.” Christliche Schriften (1798), Sämtliche Werke, 20, 92. Thus, according to Herder, “As soon as in commerce and interchange the law of equity will come to reign everywhere on earth, all nations will be brothers; the younger will help the elder, the child will serve the wise old man willingly in the best way as it can.” Briefe zu, Sämtliche Werke, 18: 289. On the unfolding of Humanität and the progressive redundancy of the state in Herder’s philosophy of history, see also Koepke, “Der Staat—die störende und unvermeidliche Maschine,” 236–37; and Hannemann, “Kulturelle,” 181.
180 Herder, Briefe zu, Sämtliche Werke, 17: 213.
natural or artificial states but by peoples. With their national characters firmly established and their members educated, nations see government replaced by self-government.\textsuperscript{182}

Whether this is anarchism is a matter of discussion and depends on one’s understanding of anarchism. Beiser warns us not to take Herder’s anarchism “too literally” since it is an ideal where “the law rules.”\textsuperscript{183} Herder himself tells us that “in the end laws have to rule and not princes.”\textsuperscript{184} However, this does not imply that Herder longed for a return to natural states or to the patriarchism of ancient Israel. As he admits, the wheel of history cannot be turned back, and it would be foolish to return to “youthful frivolousness” (jugendlicher Leichtsinn).\textsuperscript{185} What, Herder asked, would people at more advanced stages of development think of ancient practices such as King Solomon sacrificing twelve-thousand pigs for the sake of the common good?\textsuperscript{186}

One could speculate to what extent interaction between these loosely cooperating and self-governing nations would foster institutions and integration at a supranational level. Malsch believes that Herder has in mind a union of nations at the European level.\textsuperscript{187} However, as Malsch himself admits, Herder had no concrete institutional plans to explain how such a union would materialize.\textsuperscript{188} Neither was Herder very explicit about future “self-government.” It would have contradicted his historicism to spell it out explicitly. For in the happy days of self-government, peoples would have to decide on their own how to realize their freedom. “Enough, the Deity has left human beings free, as to how, with regards to the object of civic society to which they are indeed predestined and in which the flower of our species blossoms, they want to organize themselves on earth.”\textsuperscript{189}

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, it can be argued that those claiming Herder is a political nationalist who postulates a necessary link between the nation and the state are misreading Herder.

\textsuperscript{182}Viz. also Barnard, *Herder on Nationality, Humanity, and History*, 28.
\textsuperscript{183}Beiser, *Enlightenment*, 212, 214.
\textsuperscript{184}Herder, *Vom Einfluss, Sämtliche Werke*, 9: 374.
\textsuperscript{185}Herder, *Ideen, Sämtliche Werke*, 14: 104.
\textsuperscript{188}Malsch, *Nationen*, 127.
The ethnonationalists are misinterpreting Herder. When he writes that the most natural state is the one that comprises one people with one national character, Herder is adumbrating only half—and the more banal half—of the nationalist credo. \(^{190}\) Herder does not articulate the second half of the nationalist credo, that a nation by virtue of the fact that it is a nation is entitled to its own state. The organic natural state of the past, Herder thought, was neither relevant in the Europe of his own time nor a solution for the future.

While Herder writes that each Volk has its Nationalbildung, its own national development, that each nation has a distinct physiognomy as well as a particular language, he insists that variants in this physiognomy are shades of one picture and that constitutions melt into each other. \(^{191}\) Differences among men are not such as to justify a separate state for each shade of humanity. Human diversity is an insurance against the despotism of states. It is not a license for the creation of states.

Neither should Herder be seen as a Romantic nationalist preaching an aggressive gospel of national or racial superiority. Herder is utterly explicit in his rejection of such a narrow and exclusive brand of nationalism. "What is a nation?" Herder asks. "A great garden without culture, full of good and bad weeds. Who would want to take in a block the defence of this multitude where vices and stupidities are mixed with merits and virtues . . . ?" \(^{192}\) Finally, Berlin quotes Herder: "To brag of one's country is the stupidest form of boastfulness." \(^{193}\)

Equally misleading is to state that Herder was a precursor of the modernist Gellnerian vision of the nation as a functional top-down creation of the state. To argue in such a way would be to misjudge Herder's priorities since for him the state should never gain precedence over the nation. Whereas nations are products of nature and thus possess for Herder a quasi-ontological status, states are only ephemeral and artificial constructs fulfilling temporary tasks. For Herder it is the states that are functional and subordinated to the nation and not, pace Gellner, vice-versa.

\(^{190}\) He is saying that states function harmoniously when they are of one mind. Almost a century later, J. S. Mill was to make a point that can be understood in the same sense when he stated that "free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities. Among a people without fellow-feeling, especially if they read and speak different languages, the united public opinion necessary to the working of representative government cannot exist." John Stuart Mill, "Considerations on Representative Government" (1861), in Three Essays (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924), 297. For an extensive interpretation of Mill's position, see Georgios Varouxakis, Mill on Nationality (London: Routledge, 2002).


\(^{192}\) Herder, Briefe zu (1793–1797), Sämtliche Werke, 27: 211.

Not only is the state not the end product of history, but Herder also clearly sets limits against overtly interventionist states attempting to impose too much homogenization on nations. Although states may fulfill a temporary integrative function, they always have to respect the natural characteristics of nations. After all, the final purpose of a nation is to ensure the blossoming and creativity of its constituent parts, which can only express themselves in diversity. Excessively repressive or uncompromisingly modernizing states would certainly destroy such fragile plants as nations.

Nor should Herder be seen exclusively as a cultural nationalist to whom government or the state does not matter. Herder thought each nation was entitled to have good government, be it in the natural or the artificial state, or even in the final stage of Humanität. He also made very specific prescriptions for the role the artificial state should play in those situations were its existence was necessary. Herder is no anarchist either since he does not believe that all states are bad. As human artworks, states can play a positive role in shaping and defending the national character so essential to the survival of all nations and the achievement of Humanität. Whether or not nations temporarily need an artificial state is wholly dependent on their specific development and historical situation. Some nations might even dispense with states altogether.

The best way to approach Herder’s thinking about nationalism is, thus, an intermediary approach that combines the cultural and historical aspects of the nation with the political dimensions of government and self-determination. Such an approach has been adumbrated by Barnard and Spencer. However, it is just as essential to adopt a historicist analysis that takes into account Herder’s philosophy of history with its implied evolution towards Humanität.

At this point Barnard’s approach falters, as it does not seem to appreciate fully the positive transitory role states might play. Barnard admits that: “It is not clear, how, if the cultivation of individual dispositions is to follow the creation of an institutional matrix, the latter should come about in the first place.” Barnard also underestimates Herder’s concerns and interrogations about the nations of his own days. Clearly, the situation after the French Revolution was such that Herder was counting on states to persist for some time to come, and

194 For a view of Herder as defender of “situated individualism,” individual faculties only being able to express themselves in a communitarian setting, see Spencer, “Towards an Ontology of Historical Individuality: Herder’s Theory of Identity, Culture and Community,” History of European Ideas 22, no. 3: 245–60.


196 Barnard, Herder on Nationality, Humanity, and History, 171 (italics are Barnard’s).
he placed hope on the better ones. Finally, one wonders whether Barnard does not tend to conflate the patriarchal and authoritarian communitarianism beneficial to young nations with the democratic ideal of self-government expected for well-established and fully emancipated nations, especially when he argues that "the nation . . . does not displace families, tribes, clans, tribes and other primeval groups but is continuous with them . . . ."197

Spencer, too, underestimates the formative, moral, defensive, educational, and integrative function states may temporarily fulfill to strengthen and defend a nation's character. By focusing mainly on the rights of minorities and cultural communities, one may ask whether she does not substitute other priorities for Herder's. Herder is, indeed, the advocate of unity in diversity par excellence, but his principal preoccupation is how to maintain fading national characters in a rapidly changing world.

Whether Herder would be ready, as Spencer maintains, to allocate resources to immigrant populations to help them found their own community clubs, access public communication channels, and teach their language in schools,198 remains highly questionable. This is especially true in the face of what Herder wrote about the assimilation of Jews to European culture199 and his utterly negative judgment of Romanics on European soil.200 Similarly, one might question whether Herder would have been prone to grant autonomy-status to cultural minorities201 when one takes into consideration Herder's observation that Switzerland was a body "with too many members" (zu vielgliedrig) and that the French-speaking part could be expected to soon join France.202

The relation between culture and politics in Herder is highly complex and dependent on the historical situation and specificity of each people. One cannot assume a unilateral progression from cultural nations, or even tribes and minorities, to rights of political self-determination and creation of nation-states. If a nationalist is someone who defends the principle that a nation, by

197Barnard, Herder on Nationality, 174 (italics are Barnard's).
198Spencer, "Difference and Unity," 301.
199Herder explains that although the Jews were once a "parasitic plant" in Europe, they would soon live according to "European laws," and one would no longer be able to distinguish them from Christians. Ideen, Sämtliche Werke, 14: 283–84.
201Spencer, "Difference and Unity," 304.
202The letter to Müller, dated October 18, 1802, is reproduced in Dobbeck, "Johann Gottfried Herders," 353.
virtue of its nationhood, has an unconditional right to form its own state so that the political and the national coincide, Herder does not correspond to this understanding. Herder is credited, probably incorrectly, with being the first German author to use the term "Nationalismus." If so, it is not the term he would use to describe his own thought.

203 According to Carlton Hayes, Herder was the first German writer to use the term "Nationalismus." Hayes cites a passage from Herder's *Christliche Schriften* published in 1798: "However, since his [Christ's] own death taught him how little there was to accomplish among this people [the Hebrews], religion and nationalism have been unexpectedly and eternally separated—by what?" Herder, *Sämtliche Werke*, 20: 234; viz. Carlton Hayes, "Contributions of Herder to the Doctrine of Nationalism," *American Historical Review* (1927): 32, 722. The term has also appeared in earlier writings with a derogatory meaning. In *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (1774), Herder writes: "Look how the Egyptian hates the shepherd or the vagabond! Look how he scorns the foolish Greek! This is how every pair of nations behaves whose inclinations and circles of happiness conflict with each other—it is called prejudice! Trash! Narrow-minded nationalism [Nationalism, in the German original, the foreign suffix underlining the term's negative thrust!]" Herder, *Sämtliche Werke*, 5: 510. According to a historian of Hungary, the term was used already in the 1760s. Members of the Austrian Staatsrat at the time complained about the "Nationalismus" prevailing in the royal Hungarian administration. Laszlo Peter, "Language, the Constitution and the Past," in *The Habsburg Legacy: National Identity in Historical Perspective*, Austrian Studies (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 16.