

HERDER AND ENLIGHTENMENT POLITICS

Johann Gottfried Herder initiated the modern disciplines of philosophical anthropology and cultural history, including the study of popular culture. He is also remembered as a sharp critic of colonialism and imperialism. But what types of social, economic and political arrangements did Herder envision for modern European societies? *Herder and Enlightenment Politics* provides a radically new interpretation of Herder's political thought, situating his ideas in Enlightenment debates on modern patriotism, commerce and peace. By reconstructing Herder's engagement with Rousseau, Montesquieu, Abbt, Ferguson, Möser, Kant and many other contemporary authors, Eva Piirimäe shows that Herder was deeply interested in the potential for cultural, moral and political reform in Russia, Germany and Europe. Herder probed the foundations of modern liberty, community and peace, developing a distinctive understanding of human self-determination, natural sociability and modern patriotism as well as advocating a vision of Europe as a commercially and culturally interconnected community of peoples.

EVA PIIRIMÄE is Associate Professor of Political Theory at the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, University of Tartu. She has published widely on Enlightenment moral philosophy and political thought. Her research has appeared in journals such as *History of Political Thought*, *European History of Ideas*, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* and *Global Responsibility to Protect*. Her recent publications include a co-edited *History of European Ideas* special issue 'Sociability in Enlightenment Thought' (2015) and the co-edited volume *Herder on Empathy and Sympathy* (2020).

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Preface

Cultural history, or the study of culture and popular culture in particular, began in its modern form with Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). Herder's influence is often characterised as 'rays widely cast' (*weitstrahlend*), using an expression coined by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Herder's essays of literary criticism, aesthetic theory and philosophy of history were widely read in Germany, and some were rapidly translated into other major European languages. Most importantly, an English translation of Herder's *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (*Ideas for a Philosophy of History of Humanity*) appeared as early as 1800 (2nd ed., 1803), followed by Edgar Quinet's French translation in 1827/1828. Although the first complete Russian translation was not published until 1977, Herder was also read far and wide throughout the Russian Empire. Furthermore, although they drew on Herder's ideas, most authors in the nineteenth century no longer cared to mention him by name. In part, this was due to the devastating assessment Herder's philosophical ideas received from Immanuel Kant and Kant's followers. More importantly, however, Herder's ideas were simply quickly absorbed into Europe's common cultural heritage as well as across the Atlantic. One way or another, anyone reading writers such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edgar Quinet, Victor Hugo or Alexandr Herzen was also, indirectly, reading Herder.¹

But what were the moral and political implications of Herder's understanding of humanity as a distinctively cultural species? What types of economic, social and political arrangements did Herder himself envision for modern societies? The usual answers to these questions have been heavily polarised. In Herder's rich and complex oeuvre, it is possible to find ideas and arguments that have subsequently come to play an important role in each of

¹ For a concise overview of the state of the art in the study of Herder's international reception, see Günter Arnold, Kurt Kloocke and Ernest A. Menze, 'Herder's Reception and Influence', in *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder*, ed. Hans Adler and Wulf Koepke (Rochester, NY, 2009), 391–419.

the hitherto dominant political languages emerging in the nineteenth century – liberalism, conservatism, socialism and anarchism. Using a highly selective reading of his ideas, he can be made a forefather of any of these ideologies. Since the late nineteenth century, however, the main contrast in characterising his thought has been that between ‘cosmopolitanism’ and ‘nationalism’, which in turn has often been associated with that between the Enlightenment and Romanticism. Herder has accordingly been presented both as a cosmopolitan democrat and a typical Enlightenment figure, and as a Romantic nationalist and a representative of ‘Counter-Enlightenment’. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, Herder has also emerged as a ‘communitarian’, ‘republican’ and a ‘multiculturalist’.

The aim of this book is to stand back from *all* these familiar but misleading labels and try to find a way to describe Herder’s political thought contextually. In recent decades, amazing advances have been made in carving out the intellectual contexts of his ideas on language, culture, art and aesthetics. A vast body of scholarship has helped to dissolve the long-lasting shadow that the (post-) Kantian tradition cast upon Herder, restoring Herder to the rank of a first-rate philosopher. It has also demonstrated the extent to which Herder’s conception of the human being as involving an inseparable body-soul constitution was informed by the latest developments in natural history and philosophy. The evolution of Herder’s political thought, however, is yet to receive the close attention it deserves. This book seeks to remedy this. It begins with Herder’s contribution to mid-eighteenth-century debates about possible reforms in modern monarchies and republics and finishes with late eighteenth-century discussions on the significance of the French Revolution and the foundations of international peace in Europe. As will emerge, Herder’s penetrating studies of philosophical anthropology, cultural history and popular culture can be seen as essential elements of his distinctive solutions to problems addressed in these debates. Modern patriotism – as a problem and a goal – was a constant source of pondering for him. He probed both the foundations of modern liberty and modern community, developing distinctive understandings of human self-determination and natural sociability as well as putting forward a vision of Europe as a commercially and culturally interconnected community of peoples.

This book is not about the reception of Herder’s political ideas. Nevertheless, it seeks to open up new ways of determining his legacy in political theory. Understanding Herder’s main concerns in politics, we can hopefully also better differentiate between various appropriations of his ideas. Some lines of political reception are substantively more justified than others.

Acknowledgements

Coming from a small country, Estonia, which regained its independence through the process of a ‘singing revolution’ from 1987 to 1991, I have always been interested in the moral psychology of patriotism and national sentiment. Is it possible to cultivate a form of patriotism that is compatible with humanitarian concerns and aspirations? What would guarantee its stability as such? One way or another, my academic research has touched on these issues for years. I initially wanted to write a book on the philosophical origins of German nationalism based on my PhD dissertation on Thomas Abbt’s (1738–1766) political thought. I wished to add a concluding chapter on Herder. However, I never finished that book and instead immersed myself in researching Herder. I was struck by the depth and complexity of Herder’s thinking. I quickly realised that Herder’s political ideas were not best approached through the frame of ‘nationalism’. Nevertheless, it also became ever more clear to me that Herder was deeply interested in the future of Germany and Europe, and that he came up with a coherent vision of politics.

The person who has contributed most to my growth as a scholar is my PhD supervisor István Hont, who sadly passed away in 2013. I consider myself exceptionally lucky to have been guided by him; István’s incisive questions and grand analytical framework transformed my approach to intellectual history. I am also deeply grateful to Michael Sonenscher for his encouragement, support and interest in my work. I have greatly benefited from his advice and suggestions on my manuscript. Alexander Schmidt has been a close friend over the years, and we have collaborated in and discussed each other’s research ever since we met in 2001. He, too, took the time to read the entire manuscript, providing valuable advice. I am also thankful for my friendship and discussions with Nigel DeSouza. Nigel’s enthusiasm for Herder must be infectious – he has known all along that in order to understand the *human condition* it is Herder’s philosophy that one must delve into. I would further like to thank Edward Castleton, Béla

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Having immersed myself in Herder studies, I was glad to receive a warm welcome from specialist Herder scholars. The encouragement and support of Wolfgang Proß has meant a lot to me. I have benefited greatly from his magisterial studies and our scholarly correspondence. It has also been an immense pleasure to get to know Marion Heinz and to collaborate with her on the Springer *Encyclopedia of the Philosophy of Law and Social Philosophy* article on Herder. Liina Lukas – another long-term friend – and Johannes Schmidt were truly resourceful co-editors of our joint volume, *Herder on Empathy and Sympathy/Einfühlung und Sympathie im Denken Herders* (2020). Collaborating with them and our contributing authors was a wonderful experience.

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I have been incredibly lucky to have grown up in a family with strong academic traditions. My mother, Marika Mikelsaar, has been a constant source of inspiration, and so has my sister, Margit Sutrop. I have always looked up to them as models of combining fulfilling academic careers with having a happy family life. My father Raik-Hiio Mikelsaar (who sadly passed away in spring 2022) and my brother Hannes Mikelsaar have inspired me with their good humour and adventurous spirit. Last but not least, I owe more than I can ever express to my husband and soulmate Pärtel Piirimäe. We have been able to conduct most of our different academic peregrinations together, but even more importantly, we share the same values and so many interests. We have been married for over half our lives by now and have three beloved daughters. This book is dedicated to my family – Pärtel, Ellinor, Maarja-Leen and Ingel.

Chapters 1, 4, 7 and 8 include elements of substantially reworked published material: ‘Herder and Cosmopolitanism’, in *Critique of Cosmopolitan Reason: Timing and Spacing the Concept of World Citizenship*, ed. Rebecka Lettevall and Kristian Petrov (Oxford, Bern et al.: Peter Lang, 2014), 181–213; ‘Philosophy, Sociability and Modern Patriotism: Young Herder between Rousseau and Abbt’, published by Taylor & Francis Group in *History of European Ideas*, 41:5 (2015), 640–661, available online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/DOI:10.1080/01916599.2014.987561>; ‘Sociability, Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in Herder’s Early Philosophy of History’, *History of Political Thought* 36:3 (2015), 521–559; ‘State-Machines, Commerce and the Progress of *Humanität* in Europe: Herder’s Response to Kant in “Ideas for the Philosophy of History of Mankind”’, in *Commerce and Peace in the Enlightenment*, ed. Béla Kapossy, Isaac Nakhimovsky and Richard Whatmore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 155–191; ‘Human Rights and their Realisation in the World: Herder’s Debate with Kant’, in *Passions, Politics*

and the Limits of Society (*Helsinki Yearbook of Intellectual History*, 1), ed. Heikki Haara, Mikko Immanen and Koen Stapelbroek (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020), 47–74. I would like to thank the publishers for allowing this material to be incorporated in this book.

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Note on Translations

A substantial number of Herder's texts, including his private letters, remain untranslated into English. Unless otherwise indicated, the translations of citations from these texts and letters are all mine. For other texts, I have used available English translations, whilst sometimes finding it necessary to modify these translations to convey Herder's meaning more precisely. I have mostly preferred translations of complete texts to those of excerpts. In the cases where there is a full English translation of a text available, I do not provide references to German originals, although I do sometimes insert some original German terms in square brackets in citations. However, since the only complete translation of Herder's *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* is that of T. O. Churchill from 1800/1803, I am providing references also to the German original in *Werke in 3 Bänden (HWP)*. In cases where there is an English translation of an excerpt available, I give references to both the excerpt and the German original.

Abbreviations

- DA* = Herder, Johann Gottfried. *Briefe. Gesamtausgabe 1763–1803*, 18 vols., ed. Wilhelm Dobbek and Günter Arnold (Weimar, 1977–2016).
- FHA* = Herder, Johann Gottfried. *Werke in zehn Bänden*, 10 vols., ed. Günter Arnold, Martin Bollacher, Jürgen Brummack, Christopher Bultmann, Ulrich Gaier, Gunter E. Grimm, Hans Dietrich Irmscher, Regine Otto, Rudolf Smend, Rainer Wisbert, Thomas Zippert and Johannes Wallmann (Frankfurt am Main, 1985–).
- HEW* = Herder, Johann Gottfried. *Selected Early Works, 1764–1767: Addresses, Essays and Drafts; Fragments on German Literature*, ed. Ernest A. Menze and Karl Menges, trans. Ernest A. Menze and Michael Palma (University Park, 1991).
- HWP* = Herder, Johann Gottfried. *Werke in 3 Bänden*, 3 in 4 vols., ed. Wolfgang Proß (Munich, 1984–2002).
- PW* = von Herder, Johann Gottfried. *Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge, 2002).
- SWA* = Herder, Johann Gottfried. *Selected Writings on Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Gregory Moore (Princeton, 2006).
- SWS* = Herder, Johann Gottfried. *Sämmtliche Werke*, 33 vols., ed. Bernhard Suphan, (Berlin, 1877–1913).