Cultural Pluralism Revisited: A Study of Herder and Parekh’s Theories of Culture

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Bikhu Parekh in his recent *Rethinking Multiculturalism* acknowledges the contribution of the eighteenth century German philosopher, Johann Gottfried Herder to philosophical and political thought in recognising the importance of culture in his account of humanity and the value of cultural pluralism. However, in his rejection of monism, Parekh maintains that Herder nevertheless made the mistake, also evident in the work of thinkers like Vico, Montesquieu and Burke, of seeing culture as a tightly knit and unified whole. Thus while he fully appreciated the diversity between different cultures, Herder was oblivious to the diversity existing within cultural communities. It is a view of Herder based on a limited reading of his work that is quickly becoming orthodoxy in Anglo-American political thought. This paper demonstrates on the contrary that Herder was fully aware of the heterogenous nature of cultures and warned against any such oversimplification of their dynamic nature. It argues further that while Herder’s and Parkeh’s conceptions of culture are in fact remarkably similar, Herder’s interpretative approach holds certain advantages for a reformist political agenda over that of Parkeh’s.

**Culture**

Raymond Williams\(^1\) indicates that the term ‘culture’ was originally employed as a noun to denote the process of tending to something such as crops or animals. From the sixteenth century this definition underwent a gradual metaphorical extension to include the process of human development. The idea of cultivation formed the word’s main sense until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when it developed as an independent and abstract noun to describe a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development. In England the word acquired definite class associations, while in France it became synonymous with civilisation. The Germans, who borrowed the word from the French, also used it to describe a process of becoming ‘cultivated’ or ‘civilised’.

It was perhaps a sensitivity to this use of the word in Germany that led T. Churchill
in 1800 to translate Herder’s references to ‘Culture’ in his Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit incorrectly into English as ‘civilisation’. It was nevertheless a significant and highly unfortunate error\(^2\) that failed to acknowledge Herder’s important attempt to provide a definition of culture in the Ideen that was free of ethnocentric assumptions\(^3\). Although Parekh\(^4\) fails to provide any reference for his claim that Herder thought some ‘inferior’ cultures needed to be ‘civilized’, his use of Churchill’s edition may explain this significant misinterpretation. Nor is there any inconsistency in Herder’s thought over this point as Parekh maintains. Throughout his life Herder stood in stark contrast to his contemporaries in this respect. In his early Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte he vehemently criticised the practice of assessing the merits and demerits of different Völker from the perspective of either an idealised picture of one’s favourite Volk or modern European standards. Later in the Ideen he insisted again that since no natural scientist would judge a sloth for failing to perform the activities of an elephant, equivalent comparisons are also out of place in the study of history. It was only with a repudiation of the practice of judging cultures on the basis of one’s favourite Volk, that he believed we could possibly attain an understanding of different cultures in their own terms and thus an appreciation of the diversity that characterises humankind both within and between communities.\(^5\)

In Herder’s view it was simply the most ridiculous vanity for Europeans to believe that all people in the world must live like Europeans to achieve happiness. It was also highly insensitive to the material conditions obtaining to different eras. The community into which one is born is a matter of chance. If a European were accidentally born into a non-European culture, he or she would develop non-European standards. Just because these standards differ, Herder argued that there is no concrete basis to presume their inferiority from the outset. Happiness, like identity, is an internal disposition that is intimately tied to the language and culture of one’s community. It is, at all times, historically specific. Herder acknowledged that similarities exist between different peoples, but while every community takes its point of departure from previous times, each becomes unique in itself because none
It follows that ‘each nation has its own centre of happiness within itself, just as every sphere has its own centre of gravity!’

With Herder, Raymond Williams notes that a ‘decisive change’ in the use of the word ‘culture’ occurred. He consistently rejected the approach of thinkers such as Voltaire whose conception of culture was linked to notions of civilisation and good taste. Herder could find no justification to support this practice: ‘Why’ he rhetorically asked ‘should the western corner of our northern hemisphere possess culture alone?’

His appreciation for folk literature also meant his understanding of ‘culture’ differed from its subsequent usage in the twentieth century as an ‘independent and abstract noun which describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity’.

In employing the term to refer to all creative human enterprises, he used it for the first time in its modern anthropological sense to indicate the particular way of life of a period, people or group. Art, industry, commerce, science, political institutions and literature, as well as ideas, beliefs, customs and myths were all recognised by him as constituent parts of a community’s culture.

**Diversity within Communities**

Herder not only recognised the plurality of cultures between different eras and peoples. In direct contradiction to Parekh’s assertion that while appreciating the diversity of cultures, Herder is antipathetic to that within it, Herder wrote with respect to the term ‘culture’: ‘Nothing is more indeterminate than this word and nothing is more deceptive than its application to entire peoples and times.’ In distinguishing between ‘culture’ as the way of life of an entire community, and as particular activities and enterprises in which different social and economic sub-groups within society engage, he coined the term ‘political culture’, for example, when analysing the history of the Hebrew people in ancient times.

Fully aware that different cultures coexist within the same community, Herder recognised that different strataums, classes and castes within a society have the
capacity on the basis of the particular activities in which they engage to form cultures that are distinct from the total, or dominant, culture of a community. He considered scientific knowledge and other specialised fields of knowledge, for example, as a sufficient criterion to distinguish the culture of intellectuals in certain communities from that of the people. He indicated that this was the case in some older state constitutions where priests and Brahmins defined their positions by reserving the right to such knowledge. Although no decree existed in Europe during the eighteenth century that limited people’s access to scientific knowledge, Herder regarded the complexity of disciplines such as higher mathematics sufficient to refer to those with expertise in it as forming a sub-culture distinct from the community’s dominant culture.\textsuperscript{16}

A community’s culture is far from a uniform body with all its parts changing in unison in Herder’s analysis. Indeed, Parekh\textsuperscript{17} merely repeats Herder’s points in his own explanation of the heterogenous nature of cultures. Like Parekh, Herder indicated that different cultural activities might develop at a faster or slower rate than other elements within a community.\textsuperscript{18} The importance placed upon certain cultural activities within a community can also alter during the lifetime of that community.\textsuperscript{19} Herder further acknowledged that both negative and positive features characterise any given way of life:

A nation may have the most sublime virtues in some respects and blemishes in others, show irregularities and reveal the most astonishing contradictions and incongruities.\textsuperscript{20}

Thus Herder not only highlighted the noble public spirit and great artistic achievements of ancient Greece, for which his admiration was clearly immense. He also pointed out the often inhumane treatment of helots, foreigners and colonies by many Grecian states.\textsuperscript{21}

At the same time, Herder’s insistence on detailed attention to cultural specificity does
not mean that generalisations are impossible. While Herder opposed the use of a priori principles that are assumed to be true, he also realised that historical understanding requires more than a mere collection of facts. Like Möser before him, Herder stressed that the historian is only at liberty to form generalisations after collecting the smallest of empirical detail. Without generalising, though, historical studies would result in a barren recital of events.

Herder saw each community as a composite of various powers and influences competing together and limiting one another in a general confusion until a kind of harmony and equilibrium evolves. At this point, certain cultural features and activities dominate others. An identifiable and overarching culture is formed that characterises a particular community at a certain time in history. It is, therefore, possible to single out the ‘spirit’ of navigation and commercial diligence of the Phoenicians or the refined political maturity of the Chinese as distinctive features of those communities as a whole. This reference to ‘spirit’ in defining the culture of a community is, as Parekh also indicates, reminiscent of Montesquieu’s notion of ‘general spirit’. As Montesquieu wrote:

Many things govern men: climate, religion, laws, the maxims of the government, examples of past things, mores, and manners: a general spirit is formed as a result.

Following Montesquieu, Herder thought that a complicated interaction of various environmental forces, individual powers, particular activities and attitudes go into forming the general spirit or, to use Herder’s terminology, the ‘culture’ of a community.

But Parekh is mistaken to conclude on this basis that Herder sees cultures as self-contained entities that make both internal dissent and cross-cultural communication impossible. Parekh himself concedes that the dynamic nature of cultures does not mean they possess no identity at all. He further draws an analogy between the
identity of a culture and that of an individual and maintains that cultures are
distinguishable based on their beliefs and practices, which ‘form a reasonably
recognizable whole’. Although he continues to insist that cultures do not have ‘a
single overarching Herderian spirit’, there is no identifiable difference between his
own analysis of the diversity within cultural communities and that of Herder’s.
Herder sees energy at all times dividing into forces of attraction and repulsion:

   No system of forces constructed according to the regular pattern can assume a
form where it is not divided into friendly and hostile forces, forming a whole by
virtue of the counterpoise of these forces in relation to each other.29

This process of repulsion and attraction is an essential part of the life force of nature.
Without it, Herder believed, creation would be truly dead.30 In contrast to Leibniz’s
theory of a pre-established harmony, Herder described the equilibrium of society as
the outcome of a multitude of conflicting powers. Yet equilibrium is also transient.
Just as a being that is driven into disequilibrium will again approach order, elements
constantly disrupt the harmonious order of nature. Although Herder thought these
alternate cycles become less violent over time as people learn to harness their
passions and practice less destructive ways to achieve their ends, they never cease.
Contradictions and conflict are indispensable forces in social development.31

**Cultural Pluralism**

Far from self-contained entities, Herder, like Parekh,32 saw each historical stage as
having evolved from the frameworks of previous ones. In addition to his critique of
those of his contemporaries who adopted a linear view of progress, Herder was
critical of thinkers like Montaigne, Bayle, Hume, and ultimately Voltaire and Diderot
for adopting a radical scepticism in which history was presented as a series of
interchangeable virtues and vices. In this approach all continuity and links between
various stages were ignored. Although they did not depict history as a progressive
march toward ever increasing happiness, Herder argued that their failure to
acknowledge the connections between different Volker and times also resulted in a
distortion of historical reality. Just as Parekh maintains that ‘[t]he culture of classical Athens was profoundly influenced by the earlier Athenian culture, those of other Mediterranean countries, Egypt and countries further east’ to demonstrate that all cultures are to a certain degree multicultural, Herder argued that without the achievements of the Egyptians, ancient Greece could not have developed the way it did.

It is important to comprehend Herder’s commitment to a plurality of values within the context of his theory of monads, which he saw as having a propensity toward interaction, and not as Parekh mistakenly claims, like Leibniz, as closed, self-contained universes. Whereas the relativist tends to distinguish between different moral and cultural worlds as one would distinguish humankind from other primate species or some alien being, Herder’s conception of cultures and their different values is more appropriately seen in terms of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘family resemblances’ between language games. A particular activity or value may not be manifest in precisely the same form in all Völker, but similarities between activities and values of different cultures overlap and criss-cross in the same way as various physical resemblances among family members. These resemblances make it possible for us to understand particular activities and values and question their appropriateness. They do not make the task of understanding and interpreting these practices a simple one. He admitted that the historian may not be able to achieve absolute objectivity. But in principle, at least, the existence of common human attributes combined with the power of human imagination mean that, if we try hard enough, it is possible to come to understand the rationale even for such alien practices as cannibalism.

The reason it is possible in principle for us to know and understand the aspirations, values and ends of societies different from our own is because they possess a certain common quality by virtue of the meanings that they possess for people, who are different from us, but who are nevertheless human. This is equally true of both
humane and inhumane acts. Although most of us would consider cannibalism an inhumane practice, it is not the case that people who have performed this practice are not human. Herder was acutely aware that a commitment to this assertion would make their actions inexplicable. Thus he maintained that cannibals, like all people, possess ‘Humanität, Vernunft und Sprache’ (humanity, reason and language). It follows that we can discover and understand the reasons for their actions and beliefs:

No cannibal devours his brothers and children; their inhumane practice is a savage right of war, to nourish their valour, and terrify their enemies. It is no more or less than a gross political rationale...  

Significantly, Herder does not conclude from this ability to imagine that such practices have meaning for the people who perform them that they are morally right. Contrary to the relativist proposition that ‘right’ can only be coherently understood to mean ‘right for a given society’, Herder believed that the reasons behind inhumane practices in cultures different from our own are just as misguided as inhumane practices performed by individuals within European communities:

Misguided reason, or unbridled luxury, has engendered many more singular abominations among us... But no-one on this account will deny that the figure of humanity is engraven on the heart of the sodomite, the oppressor, the assassin, though almost effaced by this licentious manners and passions...  

The basis for our understanding of inhumane practices in other cultures also lies in the fact that our own moral community is never immune from failing to act in accordance with our Humanität. A connection can therefore be drawn between such alien practices and our own. While the practice of cannibalism is both foreign to our own way of life and abhorrent to many of us, we can nevertheless recognise as human the perpetuation of inhumane practices for the sake of political reasons. Thus, according to Herder, the only distinction is that Europeans overpower their Humanität in different ways. The problem, for Herder, is not that people who perform such acts lack the capacity to develop their Humanität or that they lack reason. Rather, in these cases, Humanität has been overpowered by other...
considerations such as necessity, power or politics. Given our ultimate interest lies in the realisation of our Humanität, Herder believed that these other considerations, while understandable, are nonetheless based on a misguided conception of their ends.

The method of empathy that Herder developed is thus crucial in the initial collecting and compiling of historical data, but such understanding does not exclude criticism. The task of the historian is to show the complexity and diversity in history. After explaining in detail, for example, the Hindu social system and form of government, Herder went on to describe not only a number of its positive features, but also what he considered to be its negative features including the treatment of untouchables and the practice of burning wives on the funeral pyre of their husbands, for which he could find no legitimate moral justification other than tacit custom. Without doubt Herder was an historicist in the sense that Berlin defined the term as someone who holds ‘that human thought and action are fully intelligible only in relation to their historical context’. But it does not follow that he was a relativist. Far from being unable to criticise cultural practices that do not cause internal consent as Parekh claims, Herder was both a social commentator and critic. His historical works exemplify few qualities with which a relativist would find satisfaction.

Diversity and Unity

Nor is it Herder’s aim ‘to suppress…[a community’s] internal diversities and differences’ as Parekh asserts. Just as the life force of nature would cease to exist without diversity and conflict, so too would political life. For Herder, a uniform society without dissent is not a healthy polity. Unlike Rousseau who favoured a closely-knit and consensual citizenry, Herder believed that it is natural for people within a Volk to have a diverse range of opinions and interests. The republican structure he had in mind gives sufficient vent to and encouraged as many opinions as possible:
If the state is what it should be, the eye of general reason, the ear and heart of general fairness and goodness: thus it will hear every voice and will stimulate and awaken the activity of people according to their various tendencies, sensitivities, weaknesses and needs.53

At the same time, Herder did not want to promote an atomised and disconnected society. His confidence about the creation of a unified political system based on the co-operation of diverse groups stemmed from his belief that a tendency exists in human society, like nature, for unity to develop from diversity.54 With his strong aversion to the centralised administrations of his time, his ideal was encapsulated in the Mosaic Constitution whereby government was intended as an invisible, rational and charitable power that would guide rather than coerce people. Yet while he possessed anarchist sympathies,55 he was equally aware of the danger of too much decentralisation leading to chaos.56 For Herder, the principle function of government is to maintain the correct balance between diversity and unity:

Unity and diversity are the perfections which mark all enduring works of nature and its imitator, art; thus it is indisputable that also the highest, most difficult and most necessary art of people, the directing of a nation for the general welfare, must strive and strive unnoticed according to these qualities.57

Although Herder saw a republican system as the most conducive to the realisation of individual self-determination and creativity, he also denied the existence of a ‘best form of government’ that would suit all communities at once and in precisely the same way. While a government may be good in one place and time, he pointed out that it might also become malformed if it is introduced in another situation under the wrong circumstances.58 Although once derided for failing to develop a theory of the state,59 the advantage of Herder’s theory, as Parekh unwittingly shows, lies in the fact that his attention to historical and cultural specificity meant he rejected the project of the classical political theorists to develop one ideal constitution for humankind in all times and places.60 Instead he recognised that each community needs to interpret general principles for good governance to suit its own particular historical and
cultural circumstances. More than two hundred years later, Parekh writes in a remarkably similar vein:

If we are to develop a coherent political structure for a multicultural society, we need to appreciate the importance of both unity and diversity and establish a satisfactory relationship between them. Since different multicultural societies have different kinds of cultural diversity, each needs to develop its own appropriate political structure. Since, however, they all face the common problem of reconciling the demands of unity and diversity, certain general principles apply to them all.

According to Herder, the degree of stratification afflicting Germany in the eighteenth century was, however, so extensive that it was no longer a Volk. Although it possessed the seeds necessary for its regeneration, two main problems needed to be overcome. First was the division of Germany into separate, small and isolated provinces that spent all their time competing with each rather than uniting around a common purpose with the result that even their dialects were becoming increasingly distinct. Second was the domination of French over German culture. It is far too simplistic to suggest as Parekh does that Herder ‘attacked the cosmopolitan German intellectuals and aristocrats for their fondness for the French culture and language’. Under Frederick the Great’s patronage, the use of vernacular German was increasingly confined to the lower classes causing considerable stratification among the German population. For Herder, the danger was that without a common language in which all members of a community were educated:

…there is no true understanding of minds, common patriotic education, no inner sympathy and a feeling of togetherness, no more public of the fatherland.

In Herder’s analysis of societies with a high degree of social stratification he employed the term Volk to refer to the majority of people as opposed to the upper classes and intellectuals. While the entire society might not have formed a cohesive cultural community, the general public possessed sufficient shared understandings based on common experiences, language, literature, songs and dance to constitute a Volk. By contrast, he treated neither King Solomon nor Moses in this fashion because both had an intimate connection with and common understanding of the general
Herder by no means wanted the 'burghers, who included the farmers, the merchants and the artisans' exclusively to determine German culture, as Parekh maintains. For him, the path toward a renaissance in German culture lay in the sensibility of artists and intellectuals to their own culture and in them unleashing their own creative genius. When they did partake in the concerns and culture of their entire community they also belonged in his analysis to the Volk. On the basis of their success in capturing the complexities and spontaneity of their cultural heritage and language, he regarded, for example, the works of both Homer and Shakespeare as representing true folk literature.

In Herder's view, the neglect of one's own language stultifies and corrupts a Volk. A flourishing culture only emerges when indigenous peoples are allowed to be true to their own identity. He campaigned consistently against the forceful imposition of alien cultures and languages upon indigenous peoples. His own experience of the French domination of German culture made him acutely aware of the problem. Noting the many French thinkers who had derided not only German literature but also the German language, he dismissed their judgements as grounded in mere ignorance. The notion that language reflects the character of a people had led the French philosophes to attempt to determine the most desirable characteristics in a language. According to Pierre Juliard, they invariably concluded 'that French was superior'. That such judgements had caused Germans to look upon their own language in a negative fashion is poignantly evident in the emphatic tone of Herder's conclusion to the first collection of his early Fragmente. While acknowledging that German could undoubtedly learn a great deal from other languages, he insisted that 'no genius need to be ashamed of his mother tongue, or lament it, as, at any rate, for every proficient author the thoughts are sons of heaven, the words are daughters of the earth'. Throughout his life, he emphasised the need for people to be educated in their own language:

If language is the organ of the powers of the our mind, the means of our innermost formation and education, so we cannot be well-educated other than in the
language of our people and country. A so-called French education…in Germany must necessarily deform German minds and lead to error.74 Herder also applied this insight to the impact of European colonialism. Any attempt to force a new set of beliefs, ideas and language upon indigenous populations without regard for their own traditional way of life was, in his view, ‘mostly futile and also often harmful’.75

**Cultural Interaction**

These considerations did not, however, lead Herder, unlike Rousseau (and earlier Plato), to adopt a policy of cultural isolation.76 On the contrary, he urged that ‘no people of Europe lock itself away from the others and say stupidly “with me alone, with me lives all wisdom”’.77 Far from thinking that cultures suffer from close contact, as Parekh78 asserts, if relations between Völker are conducted in a spirit of cooperation, rather than domination, Herder believed they are highly advantageous, particularly for developing countries.79 He encouraged the Germans to learn from both old and new communities.80 Rather than denigrating their own Volk by attempting to imitate another culture blindly, Germans needed to adapt those things that were learnt from other cultures to suit their own circumstances, time and place. Herder also hoped that by acquainting themselves with other cultures and broadening their field of vision, Germans would learn to appreciate that African, American and Oriental Völker possessed valuable skills and talents that Europeans did not.81

It needs to be understood that within Herder’s particularism also lay his cosmopolitanism. He emphasised the need to learn one’s first language well because it gives one the surety and confidence then to learn other languages. In acknowledging the richness of experiences gained from learning other languages, the central theme of his short dissertation, *On Diligence on the Study of Several Learned Languages* (1764), written at the age of twenty-three, was to encourage the learning of other languages. Yet he also recognised the greater sense of self-assurance and sense
of security we have in doing so when we first possess a firm grasp of our own language:

...the language of our fathers holds attractions for us also, which in our eyes exceed all others. They impressed themselves upon us first and somehow shaped themselves together with the finest fissures of our sensibility; or because our mother tongue really harmonizes most perfectly with our most sensitive organs and our most delicate turns of mind. Just as a child compares all images with the first impressions, our mind clandestinely compares all tongues with our mother tongue, and how useful this can be! Thereby, the great diversity of languages is given unity; our steps exploring foreign regions become shorter and more self-assured...82

Significantly, he also addressed directly the potential misinterpretation of his view, that every language has its own distinct character, as a call to confine oneself to one’s first language. First, he argued that the material conditions pertaining to modern Europe dictated the need to learn other languages since state policy and commerce meant that individuals from different cultural communities continually intermingled. Second, he noted the advantages that ensue from a knowledge of other languages. Given the gross misrepresentations of Herder’s views still evident in both Parekh’s work and recent nationalist studies,83 it is worthwhile quoting him on this point at length:

How little progress would we have made, were each nation to strive for learnedness by itself, confined within the narrow sphere of language? A Newton of our land would torture himself striving for a discovery that, for the English Newton, long since had been an unsealed secret. At best he would traverse a course already travelled by the former; he would have to take a thousand footsteps to spur on his flagging pace. — But now, what a treasure of discoveries is contained in each language of learning. Secrets disclosed by the midnight lamp of the ancients now bask in the sunlight of the noon. Treasures that the sweat of a foreign nation dug from the veins of the depths are shared as booty among other peoples through that nation’s language.84

Herder’s recognition of the importance of one’s specific language and culture to the formation of personal identity was clearly not an argument for cultural insularity. On the contrary, it is precisely the recognition of our historical, cultural and linguistic specificity and the embedded nature of the self that provides the path for our cosmopolitanism.
Parekh’s claim that ‘Herder was haunted by the fear of cultural miscegenation, including even the borrowing of foreign words and manners’ is applicable to the later thought of Fichte, but from Herder’s perspective, the linguistic purity sought by Fichte would have been a certain path to the death of the German language and culture. According to Herder’s expressivist theory of language, if a language is to remain alive it cannot be placed in a semantic and grammatical straightjacket that is intended to freeze it in time and place as Fichte advocated. Constant reinterpretation of meanings, the development of new words, and the replacement of old words with new ones are all signs of a healthy, living language and of the culture in which it is spoken. If language were ever static, thought would no longer progress. A language that is not subject to change is no longer alive. It is a dead artefact, like ancient Greek, which is no longer spoken by a living community. Moreover, while he did not want his fellow Germans to neglect and be ashamed of their language, Herder thought it had gained much from other languages, including French.

**Cultural Authenticity and Innovation**

Parekh indicates three main ways that people relate to their culture. The first he terms ‘a culturally authentic life’, which whilst ‘narrow and inward-looking, it keeps alive the central values of the culture, deepens its moral, spiritual and other resources, and sets an example of a whole and integrated life’. The second is the ‘culturally innovative life’ where people remain ‘rooted in their culture’ whilst borrowing beliefs and practices from other cultures to enrich their own. The third he refers to as the ‘culturally footloose’ whom he describes as having no loyalty to a particular culture as they move between cultures taking from each as they wish. Reminiscent of Herder’s critique of the German aristocracy, Parekh writes that such a life without ‘historical depth and traditions’ ‘runs the risk of becoming shallow and fragile’. Warning against romanticising this approach to culture whereby all boundaries are rejected, Parekh adds disparagingly that ‘[i]t is a culture of
quotations, a babble of discordant voices, and not a culture in any meaningful sense of the term’.90

But while Herder’s critique of the German nobility holds a number of similarities with Parekh’s critique of ‘cosmopolitan’ postmodernists, for Herder an inauthentic life is not one based on innovation, as Parekh’s categories imply, but the blind imitation of another culture. This was also the basis of his objection to French classicism, which attempted to imitate the native simplicity of Greek drama and apply it in an era of intellectual sophistication. The consequence, in Herder’s view, was a perversion of the cultures of both communities. Though he regarded the classicist and rationalist literature of the modern, well-educated European as beautifully precise and well formed, it was a lifeless refinement that lacked the power of previous folk literature.91 In contrast to Hamann’s unhistorical demand to return to an earlier form of poetic language, Herder92 insisted repeatedly that it is impossible either to recreate the historical conditions that gave rise to a culture, or transpose its vitality into another time and place through the application of the formal rules of its artistic modes:

Also the worst Greek artist is according to his manner a Greek: we can surpass him [in the application of the rules]; but we will never attain the entire original nature of Greek art; the genius of those times has passed.93

Herder’s intention was not to urge modern authors to reject the philosophical and intellectual features of their own culture in favour of the simple naivety of earlier folk literature. This would only produce uninspired and lifeless literature. Instead, he argued that their relationship to their own culture needed to change, in order to capture the complexities and spontaneity in the way of life, language and character of their own cultural community.

For Herder, unlike Parekh, the authentic life is also an innovative one. Traditions are not given by Nature. History demonstrates that cultures are continually reinterpreted
and changed by the members of a community. Tradition is not a dead artefact, but a living, active process that is in a constant of regeneration.94 Indeed, if a community’s culture is to remain alive, its members need continually to reinterpret their traditions according to their own time and circumstances. Herder’s point concerning the imitation of other cultures also relates to the unhistorical reification of the past practices in one’s own culture: both stultify a culture by directing energy away from harnessing the uniqueness of one’s own time and place. For Herder, a recognition of the value and role of traditions in our lives commits us to a process of reinterpretation in light of our own and new circumstances, not to an uncritical acceptance of them. Every French, German or English person also has his or her way of being French, German or English.95

The motive force for linguistic and cultural change lies in the heterogeneous nature of both cultures and individuals. Herder was fully aware that a totally self-contained culture is a rarity in the history of the world.96 Rather than being guilty of a cultural determinism that ‘left only a limited space for freedom’, as Parekh97 charges, Herder believed human beings are formed to choose in their very upright posture.98 In his analysis of the human psyche, no person possesses exactly the same sensory perceptions as another. For this reason, he argued, no two poets or painters see, comprehend or portray the same object in an identical manner.99 It follows that people who share the same culture do not respond in the same way to their surrounding influence. Every individual and Volk has its own specific interpretation of Humanität and standard of perfection, as they do with the notion of happiness.100 According to Herder; ‘[e]verywhere we therefore find humankind in possession and use of the right to form themselves to that type of Humanität which they envisaged’.101 Deny this right and Herder believed that humankind would be unable to achieve what it is capable of becoming. Human beings require a spontaneity of nature to enable them to learn from their mistakes and successes, and thereby progress.102
Despite his deep respect for cultural traditions, Herder was far from a conservative as Parekh and others depict him. No apologist for absolute rule, he never employed his organic metaphors as an appeal to Nature to protect a system of government from criticism, especially his own. Far from resisting reform, Herder could find no legitimate reasons why anyone should rule over a community by right of birth. Based on the empirical fact that hereditary government had been non-existent in the greater part of human history, he argued that it is evidently not a universal law imposed upon humanity by nature. He also rejected the notion of the divine right of rule. Herder was not against all systems of leadership, nor did he believe in absolute equality. He recognised that even in the simplest of tribal societies leaders are necessary for particular tasks. But this circumstance did not, in his view, legitimate a hereditary legislator and judge. He argued that people should be appointed to these positions on the basis of merit. The hereditary system and its deliberate restriction of social mobility greatly exaggerate natural inequalities. If people were not morally and intellectually developed, the problem lay with their lack of opportunity and thus their oppression. Given that the skills and wisdom of a parent do not guarantee the ability of a sibling, Herder dismissed hereditary rule as the embodiment of human senselessness.

Hereditary rule and absolute government, Herder explained, are grounded not upon reason or nature, but upon traditions imposed originally by force. Laws and traditions imposed upon a community by coercive authority, as opposed to laws that emerged from communal customs, are devoid of any real legitimacy. But in contrast to Parekh’s ‘authentic life’, for Herder, communal traditions also lose their validity when they hinder ‘all progress of human reason and improvement according to new circumstances and times’. Although he greeted Catherine II’s coronation enthusiastically, he came increasingly to the view that progressive reforms could not be combined with personal absolutism. When forced to choose between an absolute monarch who governs efficiently and a less ordered government where people participate freely, he resolutely chose the latter:
Even if instructions are not perfect, even if men are not always honest, even if there is some disorder and a good deal of disagreement – it is still preferable to a state of affairs in which men are forced to rot and decay during their lifetime.\textsuperscript{114}

According to Barnard,\textsuperscript{115} Herder differed from many of his contemporaries because even the most progressive thinkers were often more concerned with ensuring that people were ruled with benevolence than with empowering individuals to rule themselves. Although Herder thought, as do all liberals, that acts of paternalism toward children are necessary and natural, he could not accept it as natural for adults to be unable to manage their own affairs and hence require a guardian.\textsuperscript{116} Indeed, as Beisner writes, Herder was ‘one of the most radical political philosophers of the 1790s.’\textsuperscript{117}

**Conclusion**

For Herder, authenticity does not entail strict adherence to existing cultural practices. Authenticity presupposes a life committed to the reinterpretation and adaptation of current practices. Although Parekh also voices his support for an interpretative and reformist approach to cultural practices, his distinction between an authentic life and an innovative one may well allow greater scope for conservative approaches to tradition than is given legitimacy in Herder’s thought. Yet at the same time, and despite his insistence to the contrary, Parekh’s conception of culture and his general principles for good governance in a multicultural society hold an uncanny resemblance to Herder’s work. That he so misrepresents Herder’s ideas nevertheless shows that Parekh\textsuperscript{118} fails to grasp fully the method of sympathetic identification that he promotes in his agenda for a multicultural education and the study of other cultures. Although Parekh fails to acknowledge Herder’s contribution to historiography, Herder, like Vico,\textsuperscript{119} was an originator of this method in his historical studies.

\textsuperscript{1} Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1976), pp. 87-89.


5  SW v.14: 85-86, 145.

6  SW v. 5: 509; v.13: 333-34, 337-38; v.14: 83.

7  SW v.5: 509; Barnard, 1969: 186.

8  Raymond Williams, *op.cit.* , p. 89.

9  SW v.18: 290.

10  Williams, *op.cit.* , p. 90.


12  SW v.14: 228.

13  Bikhu Parekh, *op.cit.* , p. 73.


16  SW v.14: 35.


19  SW v.8: 209-10.


21  SW v.5: 508; v.14: 121.


23  SW v.14: 145.


25  Bikhu Parekh, *op.cit.* , p. 75.


27  Bikhu Parekh, *op.cit.* , p. 75.


30  SW v.16: 570.

31  SW v.14: 213-17, 227, 233.

32  Bikhu Parekh, *op.cit.* , p. 163.

33  *Ibid*.

34  SW v.5: 511-13.

35  Bikhu Parekh, *op.cit.* , p. 68.

36  See F.M. Barnard Herder’s Social and Political Thought *op.cit.* , p. 37 for a highly useful discussion of the differences between Herder’s and Leibniz’s theories of monads.


38  SW v.8: 466 ft.1.


40  SW v.13: 393.

41  SW v.13: 393.

42  Though we may, too, disagree with Herder’s specific interpretation of Humanität that sees sodomy as an inhumane practice.

43  SW v.13: 394; Churchill, 1880: 255.

44  SW v.13: 393.

45  SW v.5: 507-508.

46  SW v.14: 30-31.

48 Bikhu Parekh, *op.cit.*, p. 75.
50 *SW* v.4: 469.
51 *SW* v.17: 122.
53 *SW* v.17: 122.
56 *SW* v.12: 117-120.
57 *SW* v.16: 600.
58 *SW* v.4: 467; v.18: 283.
60 Though rarely attributed to Herder, it is an approach that has been gaining increasing acceptance in recent years as contemporary political philosophers have turned their attention to the reality of cultural pluralism. See, for example, John Gray *Enlightenment’s Wake: Politics and Culture at the Close of the Modern Age* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 4-6, 126 and James Tully, *Strange Multiplicity,* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
63 *SW* v.17: 288-89; v.16: 600-01.
64 Bikhu Parekh, *op.cit.*, p. 73.
65 *SW* v.17: 288-289.
66 *SW* v.8: 384-49, 353-54, 358.
67 Bikhu Parekh, *op.cit.*, p. 73.
68 *SW* v.5: 182.
70 *SW* v.17: 58.
74 *SW* v.18: 157-58.
75 *SW* v.8: 210.
77 *SW* v.17: 212.
78 Bikhu Parekh, *op.cit.*, p. 73.
79 *SW* v.4: 335-356.
80 *SW* v.17: 212.
83 By contrast, Maurizio Viroli in his recent *For Love of Country* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995, pp. 118-124) argues that Herder strictly advocated a policy of cultural purity and isolation. Viroli fails, however, to recognise the crucial distinction in Herder’s work between his condemnation of the negative effects of cultural domination as opposed to his positive support for co-operation between different cultures.
85 Bikhu Parekh, *op.cit.*, pp. 73-74.
86 *SW* v.5: 134-35; v.18: 147; v.4: 422.
87 *SW* v.4: 422.
89 Bikhu Parekh, *op.cit.*, p. 150.
103  Bikhu Parekh, op.cit., p. 78.
104  The long-standing myth of Herder as a conservative (see, for example, R. Aris, op.cit., pp. 234-239) seems to have lost none of its force in recent years. Michael Freeden for example, also mistakenly implies that Herder is a conservative based on his use of spatial and temporal organic metaphors. The feature of conservatism whereby, as Freeden puts it, ‘extra-human sanctification [i.e. nature] shields a system of government, and the social order it maintains, from unwanted criticism’ is, however, a wholly inaccurate portrait of Herder’s thought given his constant criticisms of his own social and political conditions and his radical programme of reform. See Michael Freeden, ‘Is Nationalism a Distinct Ideology’, Political Studies, XLVI: 1998, p. 762. It is worthwhile remembering that both L.T. Hobhouse and T.H. Green employed an organic conception of community in the development of their liberal theories.
105  Bikhu Parekh, op.cit., p. 78.
107  SW v.13: 385-86.
108  SW v.17: 126-27.
110  SW v.4: 466-68.
111  SW v.14: 89.
112  SW v.29: 24-27.
113  SW v.17: 61.
114  SW v.5: 516; F.M. Barnard, Herder’s Social and Political Thought op.cit., p. 191.
116  SW v.13: 332-33, 383-84.
117  Frederick Beisner, op.cit., p. 189.
118  Bikhu Parekh, op.cit., p. 127.
119  Vico in fact developed a similar method before Herder but he remained a relatively unknown thinker. It is generally recognised that Herder was unaware of Vico’s work until twenty years after he first espoused the theory himself. See Berlin, Vico and Herder (London: Chattos & Windus, 1980) p. 187.