
MULTICULTURALISM'S FATHER

Sonia Sikka: *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference: Enlightened Relativism*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. xi, 280. \$85.00.)

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This book opens with a discussion of an intricate range of statements on approaches to culture, multiculturalism, and diversity, engaging important postmodern theorists on these topics. Only then does Sikka turn to Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), whom she interrogates in terms of his enlightened but sometimes debatable relativism. Professor Sikka draws links between these current theorists and Herder and explores ways to fine-tune their sometimes simplified theoretical “positions” by bringing them into dialogue with selected, equally bold statements from Herder. She filters cultural theory, so to speak, through her perspective on his works, only some of which have been translated into English so far. This methodology is daring, yet it works. Although her approach is not hermeneutical, it is mainly based on close readings and careful textual analyses. Sikka has an excellent command of the German language, demonstrated in her numerous translations from Herder. She has a courageous grasp of a wide range of interdisciplinary sources, although her use of Herder scholarship is very selective in order to make her own cohesive argument about Herder’s “enlightened relativism,” which she contextualizes from various interesting angles in her seven chapters.

Sikka is correct in arguing that Herder has been wrongly neglected by philosophers, although he was Kant’s student before developing his own ideas. She finds that Herder deserves more attention than Kant, an argument that is also at the core of other publications on Herder, such as *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder*, ed. Hans Adler and Wulf Koepke (Camden House, 2009), which is not mentioned by Sikka. She calls Herder the founding “father of the view that each of the world’s many nations has a specific and uniquely valuable character” (1) and defines him broadly as a “culturalist” in the sense she finds initially defined by Bhikhu Parekh. She then raises but then quickly dismisses the question whether one can apply Parekh in the context of Herder. Parekh claims the value systems of “different societies [are] incommensurable and equally valid,” and there is “no common human nature” and “no basis for postulating universal ethical principles” (1). These claims are definitely not Herder’s. Also problematic is Parekh’s idea of people forming homogenous organic units, intimately connected to a native geography and bound together by a shared language. Herder does not reject, as Parekh does, “foreign importations,” nor does he claim that the “boundaries between them [sc. nations] are natural ones, with which the artificial borders of states should be brought into alignment” (1). Herder did not draw such territorial and politically charged conclusions from his philosophical arguments,

yet it is Sikka's voiced interest to express, project, and speculate on any consequences one may draw from Herder's approach.

Her critique of Herder is that he was actually not enough of a relativist and did not always adhere to his own advocated principles, although he expressed relevant culturalist concerns better than his contemporaries. Writers of the Nazi period exploited Herder's work for their own purposes and Sikka is curious to investigate any ambiguities in Herder's work that would possibly invite such links. Although Herder avoided the word *Rasse* (race) and used *Menschen Gattung* (humankind) in order to emphasize mainly the shared features of humanity among all peoples, he did make distinctions. How these are to be evaluated is open to discussion. Sikka points out the tension Herder describes among individual happiness, moral life, and social progress. Her chapters range from the "question of moral relativism" to "religious diversity," and her fourth chapter is titled "the concept of race." Sikka argues: "In spite of Herder's denial of the concept of race, then, in spite of his opposition to Kant on this issue, it turns out in some important respects, Herder's understanding of human types and of the process through which they developed agrees with Kant's racial theory" (139). She claims to find indications of biological types in Herder's *Ideas for a Philosophy of Humankind* that apparently contradict his other criteria such as shared language and climate. Sikka thinks that F. M. Barnard in *Herder on Nationality, Humanity, and History* (McGill-Queen's Press, 2003) "is right that Herder's remark, in the *Ideas*, against 'wild mixing' frequently quoted in literature on Herder published during the Nazi era, has to do, primarily, with ethnic rather than racial communities" (139). Then she criticizes T. Churchill's 1800 translation of Herder's *Menschen-Gattungen* as "races" yet surprisingly defends Churchill's use of "race" when she adds: "but it is not entirely unfair since this is not the only time Herder uses the term *Menschen-Gattung* in his *Ideas*, and since he always intends it to signify biological types of some sort" (139). Such a hint is not enough, considering the important implications involved in the issue of racism, and a more detailed analysis here would have been helpful. It is true that Herder may have contradicted himself if one takes all of his writings into account, but there is no doubt that he is one of the most outspoken proponents of cultural diversity. Any hint of racism in his work would need to be dealt with using uttermost precision, yet Sikka's comments remain vague at this important juncture of her otherwise excellent book.

In the context of Herder scholarship, Sikka draws heavily on Isaiah Berlin's 1960 essay "Vico and Herder," which addressed three concepts: populism (the belief in the value of belonging to a group or culture), expressionism (the doctrine that human activity in general and art in particular express the entire personality of the individual or a group), and pluralism (the belief in the multiplicity and incommensurability of the values of different cultures and societies and thus in the incompatibility of equally valid ideas). She takes issue with Frederick Beiser's claim in *Enlightenment*,

Revolution and Romanticism (Harvard University Press, 1992) that Herder always remained committed to the universalist ideals of the Enlightenment to which he was won over in his youth by Kant. Sikka is correct in arguing instead that Herder became a critic of Kant and that “Herder charts a complex course navigating between the poles of cultural particularism and universalism” (3).

Despite these complications she calls Herder simply a “relativist,” arguing that this characterization is more appropriate than calling him a pluralist. I am not completely convinced that the notion of cultural pluralism would not also be equally applicable. It is a strength of this book that it highlights interesting points from a wide variety of writings, but in doing so it runs the risk of cutting out specific aspects of Herder’s literary oeuvre. Sikka is correct in positioning Herder as a thinker of the Enlightenment and among the most important theorists on humanity and cultural difference even today. This makes for a truly fascinating reading.

Sikka ends her book with “A Modern Illustration: Herder and Hindutva.” She had received a fellowship to spend four months in Delhi researching the topic of identity, which then resulted in her case study on India at the end of this book, a probing of Herder’s strengths and limits. She concludes that Herder’s account of cultural identity and cultural difference has, despite great strengths and advantages compared with the work of Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, also some shortcomings. Herder did not pay sufficient attention to “internal diversity and dissent” (255). One could add that Herder at his time could not even have dreamed up the diverse and coexisting processes of cultural identity formations as they can be developed in today’s world of multiculturalism. The book succeeds in deconstructing superficial notions of culturalism for the sake of nuanced understandings of both Herder’s ideas and those of others.

–Beate Allert

ISLAM AND THE LIBERAL STATE

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This is an impressive book on many levels. The author Andrew March skillfully navigates between the seemingly disparate disciplines of modern