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Herder's Insights on the "Modern" Justification of War: A Teaching for the Present?

Abstract

In this paper I propose a reflection on Herder's critique of the discourse of his time in *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* (1774), focused on the narratives employed to justify war and the use of military force. Particularly relevant is the strict link between these narratives and the self-representation of Europe as "modern". I will show that Herder's insights may help understand the framework, pattern, and roots of the present arguments in favour of wars, and their acceptance.

Keywords

J.G. Herder; modernity; colonialism; war; Afghanistan.

Introduction

Herder's ideas undoubtedly are of great importance for the history of thought and the development of Western culture. The years of scholarship on Herder's thought have not only realised "Herder's importance as a philosopher" (Forster 2007) and his great influence on many fields of study (Zammito, Menges, and Menze 2010), but also his ability to speak of today, to point out the main features of the discourse of the modern West. Some aspects connected to this have long been the object of studies, such as the age-old question of development and historical progress, strictly bound to the critique of the Enlightenment's view of progress and its "grand narrative" about history. This entails the importance of the beginning of history, which is linked to the Revelation (Irmscher 2003; Verra 2006), the question about the goals of history, providence, and freedom, as well as the role of natural growth in Herder's view of historical development, which is connected, for example, to his

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view of the decay of Europe (Meinecke 1972; Verra 2006; Barnard 1979; 2003; Irmischer 2003; 2009b).

Attention has also been given to Herder in relation to other important questions for the political debate, such as the view of cultures and their relationships (Barnard 1969; Sikka 2011; Piirimäe 2015). Recently, the critique of Western discourse connected to colonialism has become one of the most studied aspects. Noyes (2014) discusses and points out the importance of Herder's attempt to ground anti-imperialism "epistemologically" and not only "morally". Van der Laan (2009), by referring in particular to Herder's *Humanitätsbriefe* (1967b, originally published 1797), deals with Herder's critique of the narratives justifying war, comparing them with recent justification of war (in particular the second Gulf war) to show that they are very similar.

My consideration focuses on Herder's 1774 work *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (1967a - hereafter SW, V) where, as I will show, an acute view of the justifications for war, colonialism, and violence by the discourse of the Europe of Herder's time can be highlighted. It can be viewed as complementary to van der Laan's thorough analysis, which is a good starting point for further discussing Herder's positions on war and peace. Van der Laan's declared purpose (2009, p. 335) is "to read" Herder "and enlist his insights for us today". In fact, he holds that Herder's help may be useful to "gain a better understanding of enduring, hence also contemporary problems we still face, in particular, the intractable problem of war and its underlying causes". He deals with the tenth and last *Sammlung* of the *Humanitätsbriefe*, in which Herder argued against war and in favour of peace, and "provided a perceptive analysis of age-old justifications and excuses for the necessity of war, the use of military force, and the subjugation of one nation by another, only to find them (the justifications) wanting and characteristically mendacious" (*ibid.*). In van der Laan's analysis one of the main points focuses on the fact that Herder considers the justifications of war as "age-old". In my treatment I focus on the connections between these arguments and narratives with the Western idea of modernity and self-representation as "modern"².

This aspect may add an important element to Herder's critique, which appears to be not solely based on the view of a desired progress of "humanity" and on the clear lack of correspondence between the real intentions of the rulers and their discourse to convince the people, as rightly held by van der Laan (2009), but also on a more particular

² Talal Asad (2003, 14) points out that "Modernity is not primarily a matter of cognizing the real but of living-in-the-world. Since this is true of every epoch, what is distinctive about modernity as a *historical epoch* includes modernity as a political-economic project".

critique of his own time and cultural milieu, which empowers the old-age arguments in favour of war and conquests by framing it within a particular view of what is good, namely the narration about its own "modernity". Representations of Western modernity, as opposed to the backwardness of the enemies, is a way to foster their "othering" and at the same time highlighting the merits of the Western "Self".

In the following pages, I first address (paragraph 1) the main points of Herder's critique of the Enlightenment's attitude toward the "other" civilizations of the past and present time, and its ethnocentric premises, for which it considers its own values as universal, namely as a valid measure everywhere and for everyone. Through his critique, Herder shows that these supposed "absolute" values are in fact relative and abstract, because they stem from an abstract consideration and a misunderstanding about the real movement of history and motives for actions. Additionally, he points out that modern Europe systematically betrays and even distorts its own supposed "absolute" values, in order to use them as a disguise for action driven by economic and political interests, not universally but particular. Then (paragraph 2) I show that Herder includes the narratives justifying wars of conquest and colonialism (as well as deplorable actions in general) within the framework of this instrumental use of the highest values. It is possible to point out the connection of these narratives to the discourse about "modern" Europe's excellence and its characteristics, for instance, love and interest for the good of humankind. Finally (paragraph 3), I point out the similarities between the framework, pattern, and features described by Herder about the Europe of his time with the present narratives in the West justifying war. As an example, among others, I consider some narratives and representations about the war in Afghanistan. In this way, Herder's ability to speak of today is once more highlighted, as the main values and attitudes that he addresses are still at the basis of the self-representation of the Western modern world.

1. (Non-)Universal values

In *Auch eine Philosophie*, Herder criticises the Enlightenment's (in particular, the French Enlightenment's) view of human beings and history and proposes his own view. He undermines the very foundations of the Enlightenment's discourse by criticizing "reason" and the link between reason and progress. One of Herder's "central theses in the philosophy of mind holds that thought is not and should not be separate from volition, or affect" (Forster 2002, p. IX; see also p. VIII; Berlin 1980, p. XXV). "Reason" alone, in its abstract, universalizing, and levelling sense, opposed to feelings and passions, as it is reflected in the mainstream

views of his time (for example, in Voltaire's), for Herder is not enough to spur one to action: "Ideas actually yield only ideas" (Herder 2002, p. 320; SW, V, p. 339). Moreover, the spread of the "light" and the idea of "universal love of humanity" in general (an idea, not a feeling) weaken the social links and inclinations.

Light infinitely increased and spread abroad, while *inclination, drive for living, is disproportionately weakened!* Ideas of *universal love of humanity, of peoples, of enemies increased!*, and the *warm feeling of father's, mother's, brother's, child's, friend's inclinations infinitely weakened!* (Herder 2002, p. 319; SW, V, p. 538)

Progress is always made through revolution, upheaval, and deep shocks to the *status quo*. This can be well represented by the image of the seed, which at the beginning is silent and whose germination is a violent, traumatic event (see Herder 2002, p. 314; SW, V, p. 532).

On the other hand, Herder refutes the idea that abstract and poor "reason", as outlined by the culture of his time, can be universalised as a value for all humankind and seen as the last goal of progress. This also entails that the unique path of progress traced by the culture of the Enlightenment in Herder's view is only a narrative among others, often based on the distortion of facts. In fact, he notes that the contemporary descriptions of the development almost always started with the idea of the progress of the individual toward greater virtue and happiness, but this idea is based on a narrative which distorts and deceit facts.

People have then for this purpose *exaggerated or made up facts, understated or suppressed* contrary facts, *hidden* whole sides, *taken* words for [deeds], *enlightenment* for *happiness*, more and subtler *ideas* for *virtue* – and in this way people have made up novels 'about the *universally progressing improvement of the world*' – novels that no one believes, at least not the true pupil of *history* and the *human heart*. (Herder 2002, p. 298; SW, V, p. 511)

He questions the idea of a moral superiority over other present and past civilizations, affirmed by the culture of his time, and despite the widespread belief that his time would possess more virtue because of its greater "Aufklärung", he affirms that "just for that reason there must be *less*" (Herder 2002, p. 332; SW, V, p. 554). Moreover, according to Herder, the image that shows modern Europe at the top of history is a mistake from a methodological point of view. He points out that philosophy, thought, "easier *mechanics*" and "rationalizing (*Raisonnement*)" (Herder 2002, p. 318; SW, V, p. 537), namely the "centres" of modern European civilization (*Bildung*), are not or should be necessarily values for everyone. Herder believes that every culture has

its own centre and idea of happiness, and he does not accept a uniform measure for all.

And the universal, philosophical, human-friendly tone of our century grants so gladly to each distant nation, each oldest age, in the world 'our own ideal' in virtue and happiness? Is such a unique judge as to pass judgment on, condemn, or beautifully fictionalize their ethics according to its own measure alone? Is not the good on the earth strewn about? (Herder 2002, pp. 297–98; SW, V, p. 511)

In this statement the idea of the "human-friendly tone" of the narratives and fictions about distant nations and oldest ages can be noted. A hint of the "mythological" construction of the Western discourse about itself and the "others", which, as Edward Said (1975, pp. 413–14) pointed out, is constructed by viewing all characteristics considered good in the Western Self and the opposite in the "other".

2. Mistakes, distortion, hypocrisy

Against the idealised and abstract narration of history, in which Europe appears to be at the peak of development, Herder shows that its current status is very different. One of the main targets of his critical remarks is the absolutistic State. Abstract "reason" and "quiet" progress can be seen as aspects of the trend of the Enlightenment toward mechanical thought, which for Herder, as observed by Irmscher (2009a, p. 79), is of the greatest importance for the preservation of the absolutistic State.

Herder ironically points out the contrast between the discourse about the Europe of the Enlightenment's moral excellence and principles and behaviours, real purposes, and consequences. In fact, the discourse on "noble" values only serves to disguise the true motives of actions. Herder points out that "*philosophy and love of humankind*" become a "universal dress", which "can hide *oppressions, attacks* on the true, personal *freedom of human beings and lands, citizens and peoples*, of just the sort that *Cesare Borgia* would wish for" (Herder 2002, p. 351; SW, V, p. 577). This is "*in accordance with the accepted first principles of the century, with a decent appearance of virtue, wisdom, love of humankind, and care for peoples*" (Herder 2002, p. 351; SW, V, p. 578).

The "love of humankind" and the "human-friendly" tone of the speeches are very important features which Herder points out in the discourse of the Enlightenment. They are key ideas on which the narratives supporting and justifying colonialism, as well as war and conquest (even inside Europe), are based. For example, European monarchs have

“human-friendly regards for one’s neighbour”, through which they aim at the “unifying of lands” (Herder 2002, p. 327; SW, V, p. 549). Herder also speaks of “human-friendly, unselfish, noble, and virtuous nations”, referring to the protagonists of the process of “conversion” of the “savages”, who were actually attracted by “brandy and luxury” (Herder 2002, p. 325; SW, V, pp. 546-47).

The pattern on which Herder’s considerations shed light consists of two main aspects. On one hand, the universalization of values that are proper to a culture and a time, and the description of the historical course as culminating in that given culture. The idea of superiority underpins the Western hegemonic discourse and has supported and fuelled the discourse of colonialism. In this we can recognise the mythology of Orientalism. Here there is a problem of misjudging human beings and history, and partly of falsifying narratives about the past and present.

On the other hand, and this is a further step, the values theoretically motivating and expressed as such are not the real motives for action. They could not be, according to Herder, because the values extolled by the European culture of his time, “reason” and “light”, alone are not enough to move to action. The narratives justifying wars do not describe the real motivations for it. Instead, this is done out of interest, plans of conquest, political and economic power. Here there is an element of deception and instrumentalization.

Finally, it can be observed that the instrumentalization appears to be in some way necessary. The tone of the century is strictly bound to the idea that the highest stage of progress, also in morality, has been reached in respect of all the other cultures and ages³. This entails that wars and the use of military force against other nations need to be justified by depicting them as necessary for the sake of the others (nations, peoples, political groups) rather than in one’s own interest, while, on the other hand, the centrality of interest and economic-political calculation were emerging as the main features of the Enlightenment’s Europe⁴.

The wars promoted by “modern” countries are justified on the basis of their modernity and the backwardness of the “other”. The justifications can vary, but in general they are thought to bring peace, “reason”, freedom, and economic development.

³ Said (1978) observes that the European identity (the European “we”) is based on these mythological constructions.

⁴ We may think about the question of “just war”, which in the preceding centuries had been addressed by authors such as Francisco de Vitoria, Francisco Suarez, and Hugo Grotius, in the context of new issues raised by colonialism and global trade. These formulations, which are at the basis of the formation of international law and contributed to increasingly “modernise” its fundamentals, were influenced by economic and political interests (see van Ittersum 2016a; 2016b).

3. The present justification of war: saving Afghanistan

The U.S. war in Afghanistan can be taken as an example of the employment of this pattern in the recent narratives about war⁵. In fact, it is a very clear example, because the fight against terror assumes the contour of a fight against religious fanaticism and obscurantism, also thanks to the narrative of the "clash of civilisations" theory (Huntington 1993). Here I am not recollecting the broad debate about this aspect in the past, which was also characterised by a narrative on the opposition between good and evil (Asad 2003, pp. 7–8).

Al-Qaeda and its leader Bin Laden claimed responsibility for 11th September 2001 terrorist attacks. None of the hijackers were Afghan; however, the Taliban were offering protection to al-Qaeda and the US decided to attack Afghanistan. The Taliban and al-Qaeda had been officially labelled as terrorists and conniving since 1999, when "an Al-Qaeda, Taliban nexus" was established by the UN Security Council through Resolution 1267, "which links the two groups as terrorist entities and imposes sanctions on their funding, travel, and arms shipments" ('Timeline: U.S. War in Afghanistan' n.d.).

However, the mission to arrest and execute Bin Laden for the 11th of September 2001 attacks and to stop terrorist attacks from that side, was enriched with the narrative about a particular terrorism: "Islamic" or "Islamist". Mixed images of religious fanaticism, backwardness, obscurantism, and terror have been spread, recollecting all the old-age (Orientalist) stereotypes about Islam and, in reverse, about the "modern" West (secular, rational, peaceful, and so on). Moreover, stereotypes about the "oriental despotism" were also spread, pointing out the desolation, backwardness, and poverty of the country. As according to Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Laws* (1989, vol. 1, p. 83; pp. 86-87; originally published 1748), the ruler's power is based on fear and turns the country into a "desert". While battles and fights, as well as "peace-keeping" (armed) missions, and political steering of the country's leadership were taking place⁶, as one would normally expect, the narratives described the need to help the Afghan people, and women in particular, to achieve their freedom and rights, as images of women wearing "*burqa*" featured in (almost) every debate and news report⁷.

⁵ The Western armed intervention during the "Arab Spring" may also be an example (Ventura 2017).

⁶ The Bonn Agreement from the UN conference in December 2001 "installs Hamid Karzai as interim administration head, and creates an international peacekeeping force to maintain security in Kabul" ('Timeline: U.S. War in Afghanistan' n.d.), the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

⁷ As pointed out by Lila Abu-Lughod (2006; see also 2002) the images of Muslim women

There is no surprise that the apparent or partial retreat of the Taliban at the beginning has been followed by various important events, but not the withdrawal of troops. On April 17th, 2002, President Bush spoke about “reconstruction”, with a hint to the Marshall Plan, and freedom from “evil”: “By helping to build an Afghanistan that is free from this evil and is a better place in which to live, we are working in the best traditions of George Marshall” (George W. Bush quoted in ‘Timeline: U.S. War in Afghanistan’ n.d.).

In August 2003 the control of International Security Forces (ISAF) was assumed by NATO and an expansion of its role in the country followed during subsequent years, with an increase of the number of troops.

In 2004 a constitution for Afghanistan was established and in “historic national balloting”, President Karzai became “the first democratically elected head of Afghanistan”; in addition, the 2005 elections for the “Councils” are considered the “most democratic elections ever in Afghanistan” (*ibid.*). The idea of the need to help Afghanistan is clearly expressed in an agreement establishing the alliance with the U.S. in May 2005.

The alliance’s goal, the agreement says, is to “strengthen U.S.-Afghan ties and help ensure Afghanistan’s long-term security, democracy, and prosperity”. Moreover, the agreement calls for Washington to “help organize, train, equip, and sustain Afghan security forces as Afghanistan develops the capacity to undertake this responsibility,” and to continue to rebuild the country’s economy and political democracy. (*ibid.*)

The basic traits of Herder’s analysis and their link to the representation of modernity can be recognised here. The “reconstruction” of the country as (economic and social) progress opposed to stagnation; the intervention in political life and the possibility of “free” elections is an example of the struggle of freedom against despotism, which in this specific case is also “oriental”; the struggle against religious fanaticism and obscurantism. In fact, the interpretation of Islamic religion held by the Taliban was described as very intolerant and oppressive for all.

The war in Afghanistan was presented as a civilizing, modernizing, and liberating mission. With the force of foreign weapons, a fragile and partial democracy was built, huge funds were given, an “alliance” was created, and the ally strengthened and trained to fight against common enemies. With all this, it was easy to believe that the occupation and the war were undertaken to bring aid and to “liberate” the Afghan people

in the West are “reductive” and even “instrumental”, being used, as in the war in Afghanistan, as a motivation for war.

from the Taliban oppressors: an example of the "love of humanity" and interest in the fate of Afghan women and Afghans in general. However, the sudden and hasty withdrawal of American troops in 2021 showed something very different. The Taliban conquered Kabul in a matter of days, after years of war, occupation, and needless suffering. There is little interest in the reports on what is happening now, and this happens amidst the disinterest of international partners:

Life under the Taliban is the worst women's rights crisis on the planet. When the Taliban returned to power last August, they imposed immediate and brutal restrictions, the harshest of which were reserved for women. (Akbar 2022)

Behind the curtain of the need to help Afghan people there were economic, political, and geopolitical interests of many types, which simply are not there anymore. Moreover, that curtain has prevented Western public opinion from seeing the damages caused by war and occupation, also by the "good" forces, as well as by sudden and "from above" changes of the society. Now it is clear to all that they were promises which could not have been maintained. This aspect was highlighted, for example, by Iranian director Samira Makhmalbaf in her film *At Five in the Afternoon* (2003).

4. Conclusions

This brief discussion of Herder's insights on the justification of war by the discourse of his time, its link to the idea of "modernity", and the example of the narrative supporting war in Afghanistan allow us to derive some conclusive reflections and questions for future further investigation.

Firstly, as noted above, the mode of argumentation and the framework is very similar to the present one. Herder addressed the discourse of the modern West when it was not yet completely all-pervasive, and it was possible to see and point out its contours and limits.

Herder helps shed light on the roots of what later would become ideas such as the "white man's burden" and the "*mission civilisatrice*". In Herder's time this kind of narratives and the conditions for their production were still in a phase of development. The industrial revolution was beginning, the bourgeoisie was struggling for recognition and power, and the new phase of colonialism was in preparation. In general, European culture, dealing with the non-European and in particular "Oriental" world, with the new questions it raised, showed liveliness and interest in broadening knowledge in all fields, rather than a set of crystallised

views (Hazard 2013; Schwab 1984). This phase reached into the first decades of the 19th century, when there was a consolidation and a kind of closure in what Maxime Rodinson (2002, p. 65) defines as “conscious and intellectually-developed Eurocentrism”, linked to developments in the colonial enterprise. One of the main questions of this phase is related to the elaboration of a historical view to replace the traditional narrative derived from the Bible. “A broad range of varieties of political experience far beyond the confines of Christendom and the Greco-Roman tradition became visible for the first time and enabled Europeans to define their own place in the world” (Fillafer and Osterhammel 2011, p. 123). Herder highlights the connection of these narratives, which show the excellence of one given civilisation or culture over others, with the political and military struggle for world supremacy. It was crucial to describe the course of history as a linear progress of morality and reason, and to show that one’s own culture and civilisation was at the peak of it, even by falsifying historical reconstructions. This approach contributed to the shaping of the discourse in a “modern” perspective, which would become the main ideological basis for colonialism and imperialism.

Despite the distance in time and all the critiques of colonialism, orientalism, Eurocentrism, and the Enlightenment’s “grand narrative”, this discourse has not changed much. In the present time we can think about the discourse, exemplified by Fukuyama’s treatment of the “end of history” (1989), which identifies the West with the capitalist and liberal political-economic system and a particular view of “reason”, and considers it the peak of history and the model for universal values. The conditions for the construction of this type of vision have not changed much. There are economic and strategic interests of “Western” countries in different areas of the world and economic, political, and an increasing cultural dependence of many countries on the “West” (or “Global North”) can be pointed out (Said 1978, pp. 321–28).

As an additional remark, it can be observed that the use of deceptive images and ideas of “love for humankind” in the narratives justifying war appears to be “necessary” in the framework of the discourse and self-representation of the modern West. In this framework the motives for action cannot simply be selfish and pursuing a particular interest, but they must be presented as stemming from universal values, for the good of other people, nations, and civilizations.

Finally, it can be pointed out that there is (still today) a discrepancy between those who manage information and produce narratives and those who receive them. Such a discrepancy is not good for democracy.

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