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Herder's Constitutive Recognitionalism: Against Condillac and Kant

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Abstract

Herder is often recognised as the intellectual originator of a tradition that stresses that language assimilation is a wrong. In what follows, I argue that that the way in which he has influenced that tradition is often misunderstood. Herder's originality does not lie in his development of 'linguistic constitutivism' – the view that language plays a constitutive role in human cognition. Herder surely endorsed linguistic constitutivism, but so did earlier theorists, like Condillac, as well as French revolutionary theorists such as l'Abbé Grégoire. The original move that Herder made, I argue, is to add a normative, recognitionalist argument to the constitutive argument, and to intertwine the two. It is his constitutive recognitionalism that makes him the trailblazer of a new tradition.

Keywords: Herder; Condillac; Kant; multiculturalism; Nationalism; recognition

Disputes over the accommodation of regional, national, and cultural minorities lie at the heart of over 50 of the world's violent and many more non-violent conflicts (Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research 2021: 19). For this reason alone, theorising that accommodation is a relevant task for moral and political theory. Doing so gives rise to questions such as: Are national-cultural peoples such as the Catalans in Spain, the Tigray in Ethiopia, Russian speakers in Eastern Ukraine, the Kurds in Turkey, and the Québecois in Canada, entitled to forms of language and other cultural rights? What are the moral grounds for such claims? Moreover, should such groups be able to claim forms of political autonomy, either partially within a federal setting, or 'entirely', by allowing sub-state nations to secede from the larger state of which they are currently a part?

Contemporary normative political philosophy has not ignored these questions. Indeed, in the past thirty or so years, important analyses have appeared of the moral grounds and limits of state recognition of cultures and languages, in what can now be called subdomains of politico-philosophical scholarship such as normative theories of secession (Buchanan 1997), language rights and linguistic justice (Van Parijs 2011), multiculturalism (Taylor 1992; Kymlicka 1995; Barry 2001; Phillips 2007; Patten 2014; De Schutter 2023), liberal nationalism (Tamir 1993; Canovan 1996; Miller 2019), and constitutional patriotism (Habermas 1998: 225–226; Müller 2007).

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For many scholars working in these fields, Johann Gottfried Herder is a source of inspiration. For example, Yael Tamir has argued that her influential theory of 'liberal nationalism' is a 'direct descendant' of Herder's thinking on 'cultural pluralism' (Tamir 1993: 79). Charles Taylor, who, along with Isaiah Berlin, reintroduced Herder into the contemporary debates over multiculturalism and nationalism, has written extensively about the 'importance of Herder' and sees Herder as an important source of influence for contemporary culture as well as for Taylor's own thinking (Taylor 1993: 136, 138). And in earlier work, I have emphasised that Will Kymlicka's canonical theory of minority rights inscribes a Herderian way of conceptualising culture and language in liberal political theory, thereby instituting a 'liberal linguistic turn' (De Schutter 2016).

I think the appeal and influence of Herder in these debates are deserved. Indeed, most of the philosophical grounds and normative arguments of these early 21st century calls for national-cultural-linguistic recognition are strikingly similar to those developed by Herder. But below I will try to show that the way in which the current discussions are indebted to Herder is often misunderstood. And this misunderstanding is not just interesting from the point of view of intellectual history. It also shows us something about the morality of linguistic and cultural recognition itself. Or so I will argue.

The misunderstanding is that Herder's world-historical contribution is to have originated the idea that language is not external to the thought process, but that, in fact, thought is dependent on language. For example, in his history of philosophy, Habermas writes that it is only with Herder (and Hamann and Humboldt) that the view that the Platonic idea has primacy over the linguistic expression was overcome (Habermas 2019: 438, n.159). Or, as Taylor put it in an interview, contrasting Herder's thought with that of Kant:

> you've got to assume, if you're Kant, as your starting point, that there's this input, intuition, and there's a framework of concepts, so intuitions without concepts are empty— that's how it divides up! Well is that really how it divides up? How do we get these terms? Well we get them through changing philosophical traditions where we had interacting 'faculties': sensibility, understanding, and there are all these different definitions of these differences. But what tells us that that's how things divide up just naturally for everybody, as though we just need to introspect and see that there is intuition, concepts, etc.? Hamann and Herder make great play with this, they both wrote meta-critiques of Kant's Critique arguing that Kant had simply taken a whole language off a shelf, as it were. (Taylor 2016: 18)

More specifically, Taylor has forcefully argued that Herder, specifically in Herder's critique of Condillac in the *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, starts off a fundamentally new tradition of thinking about language and meaning (Taylor 1995: 79–80). On the old view, language is seen as external dressing of the thoughts one can already have without language. Those thoughts are essentially non-linguistic. Against this instrumentalist view, Taylor claims that Herder puts forward a new understanding which assigns a constitutive role to language. On this new view, thinking requires language and, therefore, the content of what we think is language dependent.

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The expression of thought is understood to be constitutive of the thought itself, which is why Taylor terms this new, Herderian line *constitutive-expressivism*.

This language discussion in itself is for Taylor indicative of a wider split in modern culture: the instrumentalist view emphasises atomism and disengaged rationality and is appealed to by scholars like Descartes, Locke and Condillac, B.F. Skinner, Quine, and Davidson (the so-called HLC-tradition, for Hobbes, Locke, and Condillac), whereas the constitutive-expressive view emphasises situatedness and indebtedness to language and is also at work in Hegel, Humboldt, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Taylor himself (the HHH-tradition, for Hamann, Herder, Humboldt) (see Taylor 1995 and 2016: 1–50).

I do not challenge the idea that Herder endorsed the constitutive view. He does. As I will show in part I of this paper through an analysis of Herder's critique of Kant, Herder emphatically holds that thought depends on language; Herder is a constitutivist.

But two elements of the received view are in my view problematic, the first exegetical and the second conceptual. The first problem is that Herder is not the originator of this view, and as such his influence on contemporary debates is misunderstood. In fact, at the core of the earlier tradition that Taylor opposes, the HLC-tradition, we can already find constitutivism. In particular, in part II below, I will argue that Condillac, an 18th century French philosopher of language who preceded Herder embraced a constitutive view of the relationship between thought and language, as did several French revolutionary intellectuals in the final decade of the 18th century who worked out a language policy for the French Revolution that broadly relied on a Condillacian view of the language-thought relationship. Herder can therefore not be credited by having spearheaded constitutivism or by representing a decisive language-theoretical break with Condillac.

The second problem with the received view is that the constitutive view is conceptually incomplete as a justification for the case for national-cultural-linguistic rights. As indicated above, many contemporary intellectuals engaged in the politico-philosophical analysis of multiculturalism and nationalism – including Taylor – see the constitutive argument as central to the moral case for language rights. That moral case is then grounded in the idea that a language discloses a thought community. If language is not a conventional instrument for communication but in fact has constitutive impact on what and how we think, then we can, on this basis, argue for the moral right of that community to preserve or protect its own language. I believe this argument can work and that it is possible to ground a justification of language rights in a constitutive view of language. But it is important to see that, in addition to constitutivism, a second argument is required for a successful defense of the moral case for language rights. I will call this second step *recognitionalism*, the view that the *particular* language that discloses a thought community is worth protecting and recognising. In fact, without recognitionalism as a second argument, constitutivism might equally plausibly be combined with normative endorsement of the exact opposite of language rights and language preservation: assimilation into another language, perhaps the state's majority language. After all, more dominant languages *also* disclose thought communities, and assimilation into a more dominant language allows minority members to have access to the cognitive options available to *that* language. In other words, constitutivism is compatible with both recognitional

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(or culture-preserving) and anti-recognitional (or assimilationist) outcomes. In part III of the paper, I argue that Herder's innovative contribution is to combine constitutivism with recognitionalism. Herder adds the recognitionalist step, which many of the Condillac-inspired French revolutionaries and Condillac himself did not. Whereas Condillac was neutral on recognition, the revolutionary followers of Condillac's constitutive language theory drew anti-recognitionalist conclusions: they argued for the assimilation of minority language and *patois* speakers into French. By contrast, Herder was also a constitutivist (like Condillac), but he strongly rejected assimilation, and defended the idea that language groups and nations have a right to their own distinct existence. To fully appreciate Herder's deserved impact on contemporary theories of nationalism and multiculturalism, then, we must understand him as a *constitutive recognitionalist*. And it is for the second rather than the first half of this position, and for the way he ties them together, that he deservedly stands out as an innovator relevant to the debate today.

I will now lay out this case for Herder as a constitutive recognitionalist in two steps. In part I, I present his constitutivism about language and cognition. In part II, I show how Condillac and several of his followers were constitutivists prior to Herder. In part III, I argue that Herder distinctively weaves recognitionalism into his constitutivism, whereas Condillac and his followers did not embrace recognitionalism.

1. Part I: Herder as a constitutivist

In Herder's theory of language, language has constitutive impact on the content and manner of how we think. This is a running thread throughout his works, such as in his early *Fragments on Recent German Literature* and in his *Ideas on the Philosophy of History of Mankind*. It is also at the core of his critique of Kant in his mature and untranslated *Metacritique of the Critique of Pure Reason (Metakritik zur Kritik der reinen Vernuft)*. The contrast with Kant in the *Metacritique* is an excellent context to specify his constitutivism.

In this strident antikantian book, Herder criticizes Kant's critique of pure reason for its a priori transcendental rationalism. This may be surprising given the attempt by Kant to take on board elements from both empiricism and rationalism, by combining sensory input and a priori cognitive forms. Certainly, for Kant, experience is structured a priori by the human mind and 'we can cognize of things *a priori* only what we ourselves have put into them' (CPR: Bxviii). Yet knowledge of objects of experience requires those sensory inputs, which our cognitive system then processes: 'we can have cognition of no object as a thing in itself, but only insofar as an object of sensible intuition, i.e. as an appearance' (CPR: Bxxvi): there is no knowledge of objects beyond experience. Reason is limited by experience: 'the voyage of our reason may proceed only as far as the continuous coastline of experience reaches' (CPR: A396).

Despite this emphasis by Kant on the role of experience, for Herder, Kant still errs on the side of rationalism. For Herder, Kant's theory is an unfortunate return to a 'Cartesian' way of thinking (Bojda and Gutschmidt 2022: XXXV) about the emphasis on reason, albeit now as part of an idealism. Herder's main critique is focused on the existence of transcendental a priori, which Herder denies.

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Herder's alternative is a position that combines (i) realism (against Kant's idealism), (ii) a constitutive view of the role of language for cognition, and, ensuing from this, (iii) the view that reason is historically situated (against Kant's a priori transcendentalism), and (iv) the idea that reason can be used to trim language and prevent its misuse (against Kant's idea that reason generates antinomies). I now discuss these in turn.

(i) On the first issue, Herders' realism, we can be brief. Herder does not claim originality here. He holds that there are truths out there, inserted into the world by God, and it is our task to seek to unravel them. He rejects the idea that what we know is just a reflection of ourselves, of laws of nature that we put into things (Herder 2022: 143). Instead, we must learn how the world itself is constituted. 'It is a world, my son, which you have not, cannot and should not create; get to know her, become useful to her' (Herder 2022: 6).[1] So, rather than imposing our own laws, we strive to know the world as it is. 'I want to recognize the universe as it is given to me and as I am given to it' (300).

Herder thereby rejects Kant's view about the limits of our knowledge, and specifically about knowledge of things in themselves. For Herder

> the *thing in itself* is called *recognizable truth*. It exists in you, in me, as in all objects; and that it exists *harmoniously* in all of us, that I find it in the connection of the world as in the innermost connection of my thoughts, assures me about the *thing in itself*, as about myself (2002: 295).

So for Herder, there is a truth out there about the world as it is, and we can access that truth.

(ii) However, and this is the second point, to get to know this world that we endeavour to know as it is, we need to pass through language. This is because thought and language are connected. It is on this issue – the constitutive role of language for thought – that Herder puts most of the emphasis in his critique of Kant, who remains silent about language in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. As Herder writes in the first pages of the *Metacritique*:

> The human soul thinks *with words*; it does not only express itself, but it also designates *[bezeichnet]* itself and orders its thoughts by means of *language.* (21)

For Herder, cognition requires language. Language is a collection of words that we use to organize ideas in our mind. Language expresses what is in the mind, but, at the same time, what is in the mind is already linguistically mediated. That is why Herder endorses what has come to be called *constitutivism*: language plays a constitutive role in the thought process. Words are not external representations of non-linguistic thoughts – thoughts formed without language. That way of thinking would be fundamentally non-constitutive, or instrumental. On the instrumental view, words are instruments with which we express thoughts, as if we already had perfectly formed thoughts and were just looking for external means to express them, or, in the helpful formulation by Isaiah Berlin, 'as one looks for a glove to fit a fully formed hand' (Berlin 2013: 234). By contrast, for Herder, words do express thoughts, but the

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thought process itself is already constituted by words. This constitutive view of the role of words, according to which cognition requires language, implies that thinking, because it involves words, can be understood as inner *speaking*:

> What does thinking mean? To speak inwardly, i.e. to utter to oneself the internalized characteristics *[Merkmale]*; to speak means to think aloud. In the stream of such thoughts, many things can merely *seem* and *appear* to us; but if I really think an object, this never happens without a characteristic. (Herder 2022: 87)

Thinking is thus inward speaking, and speaking is outward thinking. When we think about an object, for example, we focus, within the ocean of possible things that we could focus on when an object presents before our senses, on some focal points. We do that with the help of *Merkmale*, characteristics of the object that we choose to focus on.

In doing, so, we have an inclination to both *generalize* and *particularize* the object before us. *Generalization* occurs by categorizing a given object under a class that we already know by using the *Merkmal* for that class. For example, when we encounter a specific tree, we may use the *Merkmal* and its corresponding word 'tree' to represent it (248). That means that, mentally, we classify this object as a 'tree', even though it is a specific tree.

But while we generalize, by finding similarities, we also have the urge to *particularize*, by making distinctions. In fact, we generalize with the intention of particularizing in the end (250). Human beings like to recognize an object as a specific member of the class. That is the act of recognizing a thing precisely. We like to understand a thing by finding the specific *Merkmal* for it that distinguishes it from other things we know. When we encounter a new thing, then, we select a specific *Merkmal* for it. We can think of a particular tree as a brown tree, for example, or a tree that gives apples.

Both when we generalize and when we particularize a thing, we use a *Merkmal* to refer to that thing. And since a *Merkmal* is the basis for a word, with the written or spoken word being the external representation of the *Merkmal*,[2] using *Merkmale* for thinking implies that thinking occurs linguistically. (Of course, the *Merkmale* themselves have been passed on to us by culture and tradition, as I will now seek to show.)

(iii) This brings us to the third point and to the heart of Herder's critique of Kantian pure reason – the historicity that comes with language. Herder's point is not just that we think in language but also that the way we think with language makes us dependent on how language was formed before us. Indeed, as we just saw, when I seek to subsume a given thing under a category, I will use the word for that category. But, apart from new distinctions that I make myself, the words for categories are not mine; the words of my language were given to me by my parents and teachers. And people speaking different languages emphasize different things, and thus categorize differently.

This implies that, for Herder, we cannot uncover a priori cognitive universals: since language is necessary for thought, and the words in language have come to us

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historically, we think in culturally and historically specific terms. To arrive at a priori universals, we would have to bypass language, but since thought is mediated by language, doing so is impossible. As Schalow and Velkley put it, for Hamann and Herder, the Kantian 'transcendental exposition of the principles of knowledge (. . .) hinges on another level of discourse' rather than being 'self-grounding' (Schalow and Velkley 2014: 5). That level is the level of language, which, in the way Herder understands it, involves also culture and history.

This point about the historicity of language is conceptually distinct – and therefore does not follow from – the point about the constitutive linguisticality of cognition (the second point above): it is distinct because, purely on the basis of that constitutive linguisticality point, one might think of the a priori concepts of reason as *linguistic* concepts. If one pursued that line of argument, one might arrive at a Chomskian idea of a universal grammar of language, the idea that transcendentally, we are linguistically endowed in a specific way. We could then think of the 'table of categories' as the table of the fundamental words or grammatical rules with which we think, for instance.

Of this idea, it is possible to find traces in Kant. While Kant does not theorize language in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 1998), several scholars have begun to explore the role of language in Kant's writings (see Schalow and Velkley 2014). Some of these scholars have even argued that Kant endorsed parts of the constitutive view of language prior to and after the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Forster 2014; Lu-Adler 2023). Of particular importance here is Kant's idea of a 'transcendental grammar', which indeed suggests exactly this idea:

> Were we to so dissect the transcendental concepts [namely, pure concepts of the understanding], then this would be a transcendental grammar, which contains the ground of human language; e. g., how the present <praesens>, perfect <perfectum>, past perfect <plus quam perfectum>, lies in our understanding, what adverbs <adverbia> are, etc. (translation in Lu-Adler 2023: 127, from V-Met-L2/Pölitz 28, 576-77).

But while endorsing the constitutive role of language is in principle compatible with holding on to an idea of universal a priori principles of linguistic cognition, this is certainly not Herder's point. In the *Metacritique*, Herder says that the way we understand things is not something that nature sent us into the world with but that it is an acquired way of thinking, that we have an educated reason (Herder 2002: 300). Indeed, in the book, he repeatedly writes that 'no Prius is without a Posterius' (90). By this adage, Herder means that our principles of understanding are not universal a priori but are derived from our interpretation of reality. Since we select *Merkmale*, which we then speak out as words with which we interpret and categorize objects, those *Merkmale* are not a priori features. They are themselves derived from our interpretation of the world. And since the words (which capture *Merkmale*) in the language that we think with come from our ancestors – and not from nature; we are not born with them – cognition does not occur through transcendental a priori principles. Indeed, for Herder, to understand how a mind works, we need to

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understand the linguistic repository that the mind employs to think. Agreeing with Leibniz, Herder states:

> Language, says Leibniz, is the mirror of human understanding, and, it may be boldly added, a storehouse *[Fundbuch]* of its concepts, a not just habitual but indispensable instrument of human reason (2022: 21).

Language is a historically formed storehouse of our thinking, which we use to think. Objects thus get classified by us using the words of our language.

The corollary is also that our thoughts are shaped by the language of our *nation*. The linguistic forms are not transcendental a priori concepts of thinking but come to us a posteriori, based on the words in the language of our nation. Every people has its own language-specific form of reason: 'Every people has its *own so-called reason,* which expresses itself in language and constitution, in customs and institutions' (Herder 2022: 293). So the mind is surely shaped by forms of thought, but rather than transcendental and a priori, these thought forms are national and a posteriori. They are historically, nationally, and linguistically inculcated ways of interpreting the world.

(iv) The above does not imply that we are imprisoned by the language with which we reflect. That is the fourth idea that Herder stresses: reason can tell us when language goes astray and when words and meanings must be corrected. In the *Metacritique*, Herder uses this idea to reject Kant's idea that reason gives rise to antinomies. In Herder's view, Kant's antinomies are the result of bad usage of language, which leads to word quarrels and misunderstandings. Such seeming antinomies are not the result of reason and understanding itself, but from the 'abuse of language' [Mißbrauch der Sprache], from the 'indeterminate grasp of concepts and their designation by deceptively obscure schemata' (121). In order to preserve true reason from its problematic transcendental appearance, we must correct that kind of language, by clearly defining the terms that we use. Reason itself is true and pure; what Kant thinks of as antinomies are only the result of abuse of language. In short, the culprit is not reason itself but badly used reason resulting from badly used language.

This confirms that Herder holds that progress is possible. We can be led astray by our faulty use of language, but we can and should also correct language and reach progress (see also Cloeren: 1988: 46-52). In his earlier work, such as in the *Ideas* as well as in the *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, Herder develops a theory of the universal progress of reason: humanity has one shared reason. For Herder, human reason expresses itself in a myriad of ways in different cultures, languages, and periods. But that is for him compatible with the idea of a universal progress of reason. And this progress also expresses itself in and through language. In fact, as is clear from above, the two – reason and language – develop in sync: as he writes in the *Treatise*, there is '*progress of language through reason* and of *reason* through *language*' (Herder 2002: 125). Herder argues throughout the *Metacritique* that Kant's metaphysical verbiage sets language, and progress, on a wrong footing. But we can correct language, define words clearly, and thus straighten the path of progress of reason and language.

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2. Part II: Condillac as a constitutivist

Above, I have outlined Herder's linguistic constitutivism: thinking relies on language. Moreover, our concepts are not universal but specific to the language we speak and the historical period we speak it in. In what follows, I will argue that Herder's constitutivism is less innovative than often thought. In particular, the idea that thought was dependent on language, *and* on the specific language we speak, was far from exceptional among late-18th Century philosophers in France. This idea was for example articulated by Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, the French Enlightenment scholar who engaged, just like Herder did in the *Treatise*, in the question of the origin of language. His constitutive views, and those of several others, had significant impact on several *idéologues* of the French Revolution who referred to Condillacian ideas on language. One important example of the latter group is l'Abbé Grégoire, the drafter of a famous language policy plan that was adopted by the *Convention nationale* in 1794, whose reliance on Condillacean constitutive views I will indicate in part III of this paper.

The claim that a theorist like Condillac already endorsed, 25 years before Herder did, a theory stressing the constitutive role of language for cognition (for this claim also see Aarsleff 1982: 146–209), is remarkable in the light of the fact that, frequently, the theories of Hamann and Herder are contrasted with a more instrumentalist view of thinking that came before them.

Charles Taylor is a case in point. As I discussed above, Taylor portrays the HLC school as endorsing an instrumentalist view of language as consisting of words as tools to name objects or thoughts. By contrast, the HHH tradition replaces linguistic instrumentalism with 'constitutive-expressivism', the idea that words are not just tools that make visible thoughts and feelings that we already had, but instead that language brings a wide range of human feelings and ideas into existence.

More specifically, Taylor argues that the contrast between those two traditions finds its origin in the critique by Herder of the position developed by Condillac in the debate about the origin of language. In the 18th century, philosophers like Condillac, Rousseau, Maupertuis, Süßmilch, and Herder contributed to the question how language has or could have come into existence. Condillac's 1746 book *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge (Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines)* was one intervention in this debate, and so was the book that made Herder famous, the *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, published in 1772.

Taylor conceives of Herder in this origin debate as a 'hinge figure', who 'originates a fundamentally different way of thinking about language and meaning' (1995: 79–80) in the critique by Herder of Condillac's account of the origin of language. Taylor argues that Herder 'brings about a rotation of our thought about language', and that 'many of our contemporary modes of thought are implicit in the steps he took' (92). He identifies two main steps that Herder takes in contrast to Condillac: (i) constitutive expressivism and (ii) holism. Both ideas enabled other transformations emphasized by Taylor, such as the idea that we are both prisoners and creators of language, the idea that language brings transformations in our thinking, the non-priority of prose, and the dialogical nature of language. In what follows, I argue that, *pace* Herder and Taylor, those two main ideas are also articulated and endorsed by Condillac. If I am right, then it is misguided to classify Condillac as an instrumentalist or an atomist

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about ideas; he is squarely in the constitutive camp, as Hans Aarsleff has also argued in his analysis of Condillac (Aarsleff 1982: 146–209). After that I will also show that Condillac's revolutionary 'followers' were constitutivists, which has implications for the contrast between the two schools.

(i) Take the first and main issue: constitutive expressivism. This is the idea that the expression plays a constitutive role in the thought process. For Herder, Taylor claims, 'Speech is the expression of thought. But it isn't simply outer clothing for what could consist independently' (Taylor 1995: 92). The latter – speech as outer clothing – is what, according to Taylor, the older Condillacian outlook assumes: we already have our thoughts, sensations and feelings, and then we seek ways to utter them. Rather, speech for Herder is 'constitutive of reflective (linguistic) thought, of thought which deals with its object in the linguistic dimension' (Taylor 1995: 92).

I think Taylor is right in imputing this idea to Herder. My sketch of Herder's constitutivism above corroborates this claim. But this claim does not constitute a fundamental break with the tradition of Condillac. On the contrary, the same vision applies to Condillac.

While at the start of his *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, Condillac applauds John Locke for dedicating the third book of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* to language, he still finds Locke lacking for not have paid sufficient attention to language (Condillac 2001: 7–8). Whereas Locke assumes that the mind gets ideas through sensation which it can then endlessly mix and re-arrange into more complex ideas, Condillac argues that 'it is well established that in infancy we had sensations long before knowing how to turn them into ideas' (7). Indeed, he says, the mind does not immediately possess all the operations of understanding (such as memory and imagination). We need to explain, better than Locke did, how our mental operations develop and get exercised (7). The main explanatory factor here is *signs*, a claim for which he argues throughout the book, and also in its opening pages, by asserting:

> Ideas connect with signs, and it is, as I will show, only by this means that they connect among themselves (2001: 5).

Indeed, 'Our mind fixes its ideas only by signs' (2001: 90). So the development of the human faculties of memory and imagination 'depends entirely on the connection of ideas' (187), and this connection requires signs. This has grave consequences: we need signs – and thus language – to develop our mental faculties. We also need them to organize the ideas in our minds, and a differential organization of our signs would make us think differently.

This implies for Condillac that a literary hero like Corneille was dependent on the progress of his language for the expression of his genius: therefore, if he had lived earlier, he would not have been able to show us his talent because the French language had not yet reached the stage that it had in Corneille's age (188). Another example: the scientific success of Isaac Newton was dependent on the progress of the English language:

> Newton's success was prepared by the choice of signs that had been made before his time and by methods of calculation already contrived. If he had

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> come sooner, he might have been a great figure for his century, but he would not have become the admiration of ours. The same is true in other disciplines. The success of the most gifted geniuses depends altogether on the progress of the language in regard to the age in which they live (Condillac 2001: 187).

Had they lived earlier than they did, Corneille and Newton could not have come up with the same results because of the state of French and English. It is only because of the progress of their languages that these geniuses could fully their talents in the manner that they have done now.

Could it be replied, Condillac subsequently asks, that great poets such as Corneille might have bypassed the limitations of French and English, by directly writing and thinking in Latin, surely a very advanced language? No, answers Condillac, and his answer is revealing: 'having been accustomed to conceive of things in the same way as they were expressed in the language they had grown up with, their minds were naturally constrained' (188). In other words, Corneille needed to have lived in the right time, within the particular developmental stage of 17th century French, for him to have been able to showcase his particular genius.

All this is remarkably close to what Herder argued vis-à-vis Kant. Based on what Condillac is saying, there could not be transcendental a priori structures of the mind: minds must be developed and that development requires language. Indeed, Condillac's take on the impossibility of the development of the same genius in Corneille and Newton at a time when their language was not sufficiently developed, is an illustration of Herder's point that reason progresses through language (Herder 2002: 125). Indeed, for Condillac, we need signs to think, to arrange the ideas in our mind, and not only to express them. Rather than linguistic instrumentalism, Condillac endorses constitutivism.[3]

(ii) The second fundamental change that Herder initiates, according to Taylor, is holism. 'One of the most important and universally recognized consequences of Herder's discovery was a certain holism of meaning. A word has meaning only within a lexicon and a context of language practices, which are ultimately embedded in a form of life' (Taylor 1995: 93).

Does Condillac endorse this view? He does not explicitly mention the term 'holism' (and neither does Herder). Perhaps using the term holism in this context has become more common after the philosophies of language of Wittgenstein, to whose *form of life* view Taylor refers here, and Derrida, who emphasized the fact that words and meanings contain *traces* of other words and ideas, to which they are indebted for their meaning, rather than being stand-alone essences.

That said, Condillac does stress that the words in a language are influenced by the character of the nation. For him, language is not just important for individual cognitive processes but also for the thought process of collectivities. Languages are 'like a painting of the character of each nation's genius' (2001: 194). He dedicates an entire chapter to this notion of the 'Genius of Languages' and to the claim that a people expresses its ideas in language, and, in turn, gets shaped by that language. By using signs, nations combine different ideas according to their particular genius (193–194). This implies that one needs to understand a word in the context of the character of the background nation that uses it: words do not have standalone

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meanings but require the background of the national language within which they are situated.

As an example of how the 'character of nations influences that of languages', Condillac speaks of the fact that a people will add 'accessory ideas' to its words (185). In Latin, he says, agricultural terms 'imply ideas of nobility' (185), which they do not in French. This has to do with the fact that the Romans found agriculture of high value as an important art, whereas, Condillac argues, the

> Frankish respect for military art (. . .) could only make them contemptuous of the arts they were not themselves obliged to cultivate but left in the care of slaves. From that time, the accessory ideas attached to agricultural terms were bound to differ greatly from what was the case in the Latin language. (Condillac 2001: 186)

This passage shows not only that words emanate from a national and historical speech community but also that the meaning, intent, and use of individual words co-depend on the 'accessory ideas' from that background community, which situate those words. In other words, words do not stand alone. They are embedded in the way of thinking of a nation and imbued with the accessory ideas that that nation attaches to it. So Condillac is a holist, in the way Taylor understands the word, namely: 'a word has meaning only within (. . .) a context of language practices, which are ultimately embedded in a form of life' (Taylor 1995: 93). Indeed, if a language structures the mind of a person in accordance with the national character of the people, for Condillac one-word lexica cannot exist; we would need the entire background understanding to properly comprehend and use each word.

In summary, Condillac is not the instrumental atomist of meaning that he is made out to be. He starts from the position that the mind needs words to think. We need words to exercise our mental operations such as imagination and reason and to combine the ideas in our mind. These words must be understood in the context of the national speech community: the background assumptions and associated ideas are part of what it means for a word to function. Rather than instrumentalism and atomism, therefore, Condillac endorses a constitutive view of language, and a form of holism – understood as the idea that words make sense as part of a national manner of thinking and speaking. For Condillac, just like for Herder, transcendental a priori could not exist since cognitive processes must be developed through language, and once developed, each nation cognizes in its own particular way. Both Condillac and Herder argue that cognition requires language, and that cognition and language develop simultaneously. Both also appeal to the notion of a national people with which the language is intricately connected.

3. Part III: Herder as a recognitionalist; Condillac as a non-recognitionalist

I have argued that the originality of Herder does not lie in his constitutivism about language and cognition, since the earlier French theorist Condillac, who is taken by Taylor and others as one of the main protagonists of the instrumentalist tradition, also held constitutivist and holistic claims about language.

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Having said that, I do think that there is a relevant difference between a Condillac-inspired and a Herder-inspired take on language with direct relevance to contemporary language rights debates. Herder took an additional step that Condillac did not take. In what follows, I suggest that step is to be called recognitionalism. By recognitionalism, I mean the normative view that nations or languages are entitled to cultural and language recognition, for example in the form of language rights or by granting national cultures political autonomy. A particular recognitionalist normative theory will need to advance an account of what recognition entails. It will also need to add further conditions and principles of justice for calls for cultural and language recognition to be justified, and much of the political philosophy domain of multiculturalism, linguistic justice and nationalism is concerned with the nature of those conditions and principles. But to qualify as a recognitionalist theory, that theory must normatively hold that cultural and language groups are in principle – and subject to further conditions – entitled to accommodation in the form of national, cultural, or language protection or in the form of self-government. Recognitionalism holds that, in addition to civil and human rights, there are also cultural and language rights.

What is the relationship between constitutivism and recognitionalism? A constitutive view can cash out as a recognitionalist position, but it does not have to. I will now argue for two claims: (i) Condillac endorses constitutivism but does not take the recognitionalist step and (ii) Herder combines constitutivism and recognitionalism, by grafting the latter onto the former.

(i) That these two ideas – constitutivism and recognitionalism – are distinct and that the former can be held without the latter can become clear from zooming in on French revolutionary language politics. In 1794, almost half a century after the publication of Condillac's *Essay* of 1746, the French *Convention nationale*, the revolutionary assembly governing France, approved a plan by the Abbé Grégoire, to 'annihilate the patois and to universalize the use of the French Language' (Grégoire 2002). The goal of the plan was to destroy the *patois* and the regional languages spoken in France and to universalize the use of French in France. So Grégoire was certainly not a recognitionalist; instead, he defended the very opposite of recognition for *patois* and local vernaculars: the plan called for widespread linguistic assimilation of all *patois* and minority language speakers into French.

What makes his plea interesting for our present discussion is the way he justified it. Assimilation into French was not just seen as a matter of efficiency or pragmatism. That assimilation is the normative goal is in fact evident, Grégoire argued, once we realize the very important role of language for cognition. While referring to Condillac, he argues that words are the 'ties of society' and the 'depositaries of all our knowledge' (Grégoire 2002: 314). When a people gains new understandings, new words will follow: 'words are the exchange bills [*lettres de changements*] of understanding' (304).

But the opposite is also true: understanding is also dependent on words, just like Condillac and Herder also argued. This dependence can have very negative consequences, according to Grégoire. If the language one speaks is imperfect, a great number of errors in reasoning ensue (314). This is exactly what happens to the speakers of the *patois* in France. The 'poverty of language' of a *patois* 'constricts the mind' (304) of its speakers. It is therefore not desirable to render the revolutionary

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message into the *patois*. Addressing his fellow revolutionaries, he argues that the poverty of these languages would 'mutilate your addresses and decrees, if it does not make them intranslatable' (304). These local languages are full of prejudices and ignorance, which can only breed counter-revolutionary machinations (304). Grégoire's radical conclusion was to eradicate the *patois* and to assimilate all *patois* speakers into French.

This theory of assimilation is built on constitutivist foundations: it is *because* language structures the mind, that we can, and should, liberate the mind of countrymen by destroying their language and by assimilating them into French. This is remarkable. It would equally have been possible to ground anti-recognitionalism in the belief that languages are cognitively neutral, that Frenchmen and *patois* speakers just think alike, and that therefore it makes a lot more sense, from an efficiency or deliberative democracy point of view, to converge on one shared language. This is for example the view of Brian Barry, who intervened in the multiculturalism debate with his 2001 book *Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism*. Barry rejects recognitionalist theories, such as those proposed by Charles Taylor, Will Kymlicka, as well as Herder. He grounds his anti-recognitionalism in a version of linguistic instrumentalism: 'it can be said of language as of no other cultural trait that it is a matter of convention' (Barry 2001: 107). Barry does not fully work out the underlying philosophy of language on which this statement depends. He just holds the view that, since the language we speak is conventional, we just need to agree on which convention we endorse. Since we need to settle societal matters through collective public conversations, we just need to pick one and the same language to communicate our thoughts in, and 'any language will do as the medium of communication in a society as long as everybody speaks it' (107).

While Barry vigorously rejects any multicultural endorsement of minority rights and language rights – although he does not go as far as Grégoire in arguing for the annihilation of minority languages – he does not ground his anti-recognitionalism in constitutivism but in fact in its opposite: instrumentalism. Grégoire, by contrast, was not an instrumentalist: he does not think any language will do as a medium of communication or that the specific language we use to communicate and think in is ultimately irrelevant. Cognition depends on language, and languages shape the minds of their speakers. French is a far better medium (though it is not perfect, and we need to reform and improve it), and if we decide, which he thinks we should, to assimilate all *patois* speakers into French, we will do *patois* speakers a service: assimilation into French will extend their minds. Grégoire, then, is a constitutive anti-recognitionalist. He argues for non-recognition of the patois and for assimilation into French on the basis of a deeply non-instrumental understanding of the relationship between language and thought.

Condillac himself did not go that far. He never pleaded for assimilation of minorities into French. But he did go in a direction of which Grégoire defends an extreme version. As we saw, Condillac also argued that a language can be in a stage where it does not allow for the full emergence of the genius of certain individuals such as Corneille or Newton.

> The French language was for a long time so unfavorable to the progress of mind that if we could imagine Corneille successively at different times during

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> the monarchy, we would gradually find less genius in him as we moved away from the century in which he lived, and in the end we would come to a Corneille who could not give any proof of his talent (Condillac 2001: 188).

This idea that a language can constrict the mind relies on a view of language similar to the one outlined by Grégoire: Grégoire argued that the patois constricted the minds of Frenchmen, and that French was better suited for reasoning clearly. Similarly, Condillac argued, half a century earlier, that French used to be not suitable to the development of the genius of Corneille: if Corneille had lived in a different, earlier, age, his mind would have been less progressed.

On this basis, Grégoire draws the extreme normative conclusion that we should eradicate those impoverished languages and, in the process, liberate their speakers. What was Condillac's normative solution? Condillac did not add a political philosophy, including a language policy plan or a theory of linguistic justice, to his language theory. So we do not know what his position would be on minority language protection. That said, Condillac does have some normative suggestions when it comes to using language. Building on his theory of the dependency of the progress of reason on language, he dedicates the last section of his essay to 'the means by which error can be avoided' (Condillac 2001: 6), and to 'how to conduct ourselves in the search for truth' (196). He there argues that the origin of our errors in reasoning lies in the defective reasoning in language. The solution is to, in a Lockean manner, pay careful attention to the way we connect signs to ideas. In common language usage, contingent circumstances have determined which ideas have been categorized under the same sign (200). Therefore, we should sometimes radically go against common usage and reorder the connection between signs and ideas on more transparent grounds. Doing so is not needed for simple ideas, whose signs are often unequivocal. But the rejection of common usage is often necessary for complex ideas (200). The goal should be to have a 'determinate signification' for each sign (204) and to make language as precise as it can be (207). And the education of children should, ideally, occur by using precisely defined signs. Never should we confuse children's minds by 'entangling children in paralogisms, sophisms, or other forms of bad reasoning' (83).

(ii) What, then, is the difference with Herder? It is not that Herder never wants to go against usage. As we saw above, Herder thinks there is misuse of language, just like Condillac does. Language frequently has a negative influence on our understanding. We should correct the 'abuse of language', which obscures concepts (Herder 2022: 121). When we do so, we will for example see that the antinomies that Kant talks of can be reasoned away, that these result from the bad use of language. If we use language properly, they vanish. So, also on this issue, Herder and Condillac are connected: both hold that the imperfect use of words leads to imperfect thinking, and that we can and should make clear which ideas are implicated by which words.

But Herder does make a move that Condillac never did. He stakes out a recognitionalist position, arguing for the idea that nations and languages should not be run over, assimilated, or colonized by other nations. Ideally, each national language group is to have a separate state:

> Nature raises families; the most natural state is therefore also *one* people, with one national character. (. . .) Nothing, then, seems to run so obviously counter

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> to the purpose of governments as the unnatural expansion of states, the wild mixture of all types of races and nations under one scepter (Herder 2002: 128).

It is the same thought that makes Herder come out very strongly against colonialism. Each nation is to develop its progress of reason in its own manner, undisturbed by others.

> Now just as every duty of humaneness commands us not to disturb for a child, for a youth, his age in life, the system of his forces and pleasure, likewise it also commands nations such a thing vis-a-vis nations. (Herder 2002: 417).

Nations should not impose their culture on other nations but should allow those other nations to find progress by themselves. After all the world is big enough: 'Does the earth not have space for us all? Does not one land lie peacefully beside the other?' (2002: 379). This is how God has wanted it, by installing the diversity of languages as a barrier against simply assembling people, as a 'dam against foreign inundations' (*ein Damm gegen fremde Überschwemmungen*), so as to enable each people to maintain its own national character (2002: 385; XVIII: 236[4]). Each culture and language has its own way of being. We should not assimilate other languages and groups; we should instead let them develop human reason in their own way. For Herder, anti-colonialism is the upshot of his nationalism.

In short, we should not impose our values on other cultures because those other cultures should steer their own course. But this argument is only part of Herder's normative case for recognitionalism. He has a related but still distinct argument for not imposing our language and culture on others: doing so would cause *cognitive disturbances*. As we saw above, Herder holds that we think in a culturally and historically situated language. Our mental world is dependent on the national language that we speak. This view allows Herder to reach the conclusion that assimilation by another language is problematic because it would disturb our thought pattern. He addresses this issue of assimilation head-on in his imaginary dialogue on the language policy of Joseph II, who made German compulsory in his multilingual empire. Herder rejects this language policy because it does not respect the languages of non-German peoples. In the language of a people 'lives its entire wealth of thought [*Gedankenreichtum*] in tradition, history, religion, and basic principles of life, all its heart and soul. To deprive such a people of its language or to degrade the language is to deprive it of its only immortal possession, which passes from parents to children' (Herder XVII: 58). To repress someone's language is to rob them of their reason (Herder XVII: 58).

Losing one's language is therefore a form of cognitive dissonance: one is not in touch any longer with the cognitive framework from within which one thinks and speaks. Indeed, a man who loses his national language (*Vaterlandssprache*) loses his national spirit and thereby 'himself and the world around him' (Herder XIII: 337). Herder holds that people can and should learn many other languages, but one must always have and keep one's own national language (336–337). So linguistic assimilation (without maintenance of one's own language) is cognitive disturbance. To force one nation to assimilate to another is a form of injustice, which we can understand, in part, as a cognitive injustice.

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In short, Herder argues not only that a language is constitutive of the cognitive process (which Condillac also held); he adds the normative position that assimilation is a cognitive wrong. And he argues for the latter on the basis of the former: because we think in language-specific ways, forcing another language onto us leads to cognitive disturbance. In this way, then, Herder grafts his pro-recognitionalist position onto his constitutivist theory.

Before concluding, one final issue must be thematized: if Condillac and Herder are both constitutivists but only Herder turned constitutivism into a recognitionalist stance, where does this leave Kant, Herder's intellectual adversary in the *Metacritique*? As discussed above, despite Kant's silence on language in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, some scholars have pointed out that there are traces of constitutivism in his work. But is Kant also a recognitionalist? Or should he be counted as a Condillacian on this: someone whose views could be, but have not been, combined with either pro- or anti-recognitionalism? One clue to answer this question can be found in the last piece of writing that Kant published himself: his postscript to a German-Lithuanian dictionary (see Shell 2014; Mininger 2005). In that very brief – but dense – essay, Kant supports the dictionary initiative. He does so by arguing that the Lithuanian language deserves to be preserved and fostered. This position clearly puts him on the road to recognitionalism. But I do not think he really arrives at a full recognitionalist stance grounded in a Herder-style intrinsic respect for people's constitutive linguistic embeddedment, for two reasons. First, his argument does not apply to all languages; it is restricted to Lithuanian. And second, while his recognitionalist view applies to Lithuanian, Kant's motivation is not ultimately based on the importance of allowing the Lithuanian people access to their culturally and linguistically situated cognition. Kant instead grounds his pro-Lithuanian stance in 'the utility that the state can draw from the assistance of a people of such character' (translated in Shell 2014: 187). The Lithuanian character is described as consisting of courage, pride without arrogance, absence (or lesser presence than in neighboring peoples) of 'slavish obsequiousness', a disposition to have equal relationships with others, and 'open-heartedness' (Shell 2014: 182). In other words, it is first and foremost because the state can derive justified benefits from the civic qualities of such a people – it is good for the state to have such qualities in its inhabitants – that we ought to preserve its language. At the end of his essay, Kant adds a second argument: 'the advantage that the sciences – especially the ancient history of the migration of peoples—might draw from the still unmixed language of a folk lineage that is ancient and confined to a narrow region and as it were isolated' (Shell 2014: 187). This alone provides a reason for 'preserving its particularity' (187). Kant's argument, then, is ultimately not grounded in the need of Lithuanian speakers for cognitive access or access to their own lifeworld, but in the instrumental value they bring to the state (given the Lithuanians' civic qualities) and to science. While this is a recognitionalist stance, in contrast to *Herder's* recognitionalism, it is not universalizable – since it only holds for a specific people and language – and it is not grounded in constitutivism.

4. Conclusion

Herder grounds his normative pro-recognitionalist stance in a constitutive theory of language: in Herder, constitutivism, properly understood, is used as the basis for a

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normative rejection of assimilation. Condillac, by contrast, also holds a constitutive theory of language but does not argue for recognitionalism: he remains neutral on the normative question of recognition. Revolutionaries such as Grégoire *also* endorsed the constitutive theory of language but concluded the very opposite of what Herder normatively wanted: Grégoire argued that we should deny the value of linguistic diversity and instead impose one language on all language minorities. For Grégoire, assimilation liberates minority language speakers because it gives them a more advanced language. For Herder, instead, assimilation cripples them, making them lose their cognitive framework, their cultural references, and their access to the world.

		NORMATIVE POLITICAL THEORY		
		Recognitionalism	Neutral on Recognition	Anti-recognitionalism
THEORY OF LANGUAGE	Instrumentalism			
	Constitutivism	Herder	Condillac	Grégoire

If my analysis is right, two radically opposite normative conclusions can be reached on the basis of constitutivism: recognitionalism as well as anti-recognitionalism. Condillac never endorsed the recognitionalist stance (nor its opposite), and Grégoire turned the constitutivist view – that thought is dependent on language – into an anti-recognitional argument for assimilation, arguing that *patois* speakers can be made to think better, in French. Herder, by contrast, emphatically rejected assimilation and thereby became an important father of the kind of constitutive recognitionalism that is at the core of the political philosophy of multiculturalism and minority rights, versions of which have been developed by Taylor (1992) and myself (De Schutter 2023). But pro-recognitionalism is only one possible conclusion that one may draw out of constitutivism. Another is anti-recognitionalism. I have argued that Herder's contribution to the justification of contemporary calls for minority rights lies not so much in his constitutivism – which was around before him and which is only one of two premises of the justification of language rights – but in the fact that he blends it with recognitionalism.

Notes

1 The translations of the *Metakritik* into English are mine.

2 Herder speaks of the capturing or holding fast (festhalten) of *Merkmale* in words (2002: 169) and of a word as a phonetic *Merkmal* (*lautbares Merkmal)* (2002:118). That spoken words are phonetic renderings of *Merkmale* appears to give Herder's argument an instrumentalist dimension. This is especially clear in his *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, where Herder develops the idea that the first human word may have been the internal mental selection of the bleating of a sheep as a *Merkmal* for the sheep itself: 'The *sound* of bleating, perceived by a human soul as the distinguishing sign of the sheep, became (. . .) the *name* of the sheep, even if the human being's tongue had never tried to stammer it' (Herder 2002: 89). Indeed, a *Merkmal* is nothing other than an '*inward characteristic word*' (89). This is not the expression being constitutive of thought (as per Taylor's understanding), but in fact the opposite: thought precedes expression and expression is an instrument to capture a thought with. Yet for Herder, this is consistent with the claim that language and thought are connected because he takes language to be invented the

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very moment we mentally select that first *Merkmal* (prior to it being uttered vocally): 'This *first characteristic mark of taking-awareness was a word of the soul! With it human language is invented*' (88). Indeed, as Aarsleff puts it, 'Herder in the first part of the prize essay [*The Treatise*] asserted that language is the same as "Besonnenheit" or "Reflexion" and that it need not be spoken to be language.' (Aarsleff 1982: 118, n.9 see also p.196 where Aarsleff states that Herder's inner language is a 'complete language of concepts').

3 This paper does not seek to provide a comprehensive comparison of the philosophies of language of Herder and Condillac, and it is not my claim that no differences can be found between the two (in fact I propose one crucial distinction in section 3). My focus is on whether, as Taylor has argued, Herder is the trailblazer of a constitutive view of language – which emphasizes that language is not an instrument – which has come to be relevant to language policy and minority rights debates today. My answer is negative. I argue that it is not Herder's constitutivism (as I argue in this section) but his recognitionalism (as I argue in the next section) that is groundbreaking for minority rights discussions.

4 References the Suphan edition of Herder's work are rendered as "Herder + (*volume number* + *page number*)". For example, "Herder (XVII: 58)" refers to page 58 of volume XVII of Herder (1877–1913).

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