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The Myth of the Counter-Enlightenment

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On April 4, 2004, a new stage in the war in Iraq began as the United States Marines launched a massive assault on Falluja in response to the mob killings and mutilation of four civilian contractors there a few days earlier. Not entirely coincidentally, on that same April 4, the Sunday *New York Times Book Review* published a discussion of two books that seemed to promise some insight into the intellectual origins of the violent events taking place not just in Iraq, but throughout much of the rest of the globe as well. Titled *Occidentalism. The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies*, by Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, and *Civilization and its Enemies*, by Lee Harris, both books argue essentially that the original sources of contemporary hostility to the collective abstraction called “the West” are much older than Al Qaeda or Jamal-Islamia, and have a broader geographical base than Asia or the Middle East. Indeed, opposition to “the West,” they claim, originated in the West itself. It was an opposition based on a rejection of the “universalist ideals of the Enlightenment, a reaction that then spread to non-Western societies.”¹ The *New York Times*’s reviewer, Philip Bobbitt, was largely sympathetic to this argument, but he found that it “needs further development”:

Heidegger, Pol Pot and Mao Zedong may all have despised the cosmopolitan city, with its political corruption, loose sexual mores

¹ Philip Bobbitt, “Our Approval Ratings Are Way Down,” *The New York Times Book Review*, April 4, 2004, 11.

and commercialized glamour. Solzhenitsyn, Osama bin Laden and Herder may all have preached against sterile rationalism and the instrumental, secular view of life. But, it is unpersuasive to locate the universalizing goals of Maoism in the ideas of the supremely localist Counter-Enlightenment, and just as unpersuasive to link the blood-and-culture movements of the Counter-Enlightenment to radical, global Islam.²

It would be difficult to say whether I was more saddened or angered by those words, and in particular by the intimate proximity they established, both on the page and in spirit, of Johann Gottfried Herder and Osama bin Laden. For, even though Bobbitt expressed reservations about whether the movements that Herder and bin Laden are respectively said to represent, namely the “Counter-Enlightenment” and radical Islam, could legitimately be linked, Bobbitt had of course done just that. What also struck me, though, was that he could so casually, and repeatedly, refer to “the Counter-Enlightenment” as if he could assume everyone would know what that meant or at least that he would not have to explain it in great detail. Here I want to ask and try to answer the following questions: how did it happen that the eighteenth-century German thinker could be compared, even negatively, with the most notorious international terrorist alive today? And, more broadly, how did “the Counter-Enlightenment” attain such widespread acceptance and apparent familiarity that it could be used as an explanatory term even in journalistic discussions of contemporary affairs?

Having lain hidden for some time in relative historical obscurity, the notion of the “Counter-Enlightenment” has recently risen to attain notable prominence. The word now even seems on the verge of gaining the kind of general acceptance enjoyed by older, more established historical labels, such as the Counter-Reformation or the Counter-Revolution, on which it appears to have been modeled. One finds evidence for the creeping institutionalization of the term in the titles, for example, of Darrin McMahon’s *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity*, published by Oxford University Press in 2001 and Graeme Garrard’s *Rousseau’s Counter-Enlightenment: A Republican Critique of the Enlightenment*, which came out with SUNY Press two years later. But whereas these two studies are fairly narrowly focused on the eighteenth century, others look to the “Counter-Enlightenment” as a way of

² Ibid.

making sense of more modern problems. Fairly typical of this tendency is Richard Wolin's most recent book, *The Seduction of Unreason. The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism*, published in 2004 by Princeton. As the title of his book makes plain, Wolin believes that a shared suspicion of rationality crosses the boundary we usually think of as separating the political right from the academic left during the twentieth century. Moreover, Wolin is convinced that the origins of the hostility toward reason predate even Nietzsche. "*The Seduction of Unreason*," Wolin explains, "is an exercise in intellectual genealogy. It seeks to shed light on the uncanny affinities between the Counter-Enlightenment and postmodernism. As such, it may also be read as an archaeology of postmodern theory."³ But there is a missing link, a third term that helps Wolin span the temporal divide between the eighteenth century and postmodernism. "In a much-cited essay," he writes, "Isaiah Berlin contended that one could trace the origins of fascism to Counter-Enlightenment ideologues like Joseph de Maistre and Johann Georg Hamann."⁴ Counter-Enlightenment, fascism, postmodernism: that is the unholy alliance Wolin sets out to expose, and it is principally the intellectual historian Isaiah Berlin who gives Wolin the authority and evidence he needs to prove his case.

As he indicates, Wolin is far from alone in emphasizing Isaiah Berlin's role in establishing the "Counter-Enlightenment" as a recognizable critical and historical term. All of the books previously mentioned frankly acknowledge their indebtedness to Berlin's writings. Even more generally, Berlin's influence has been extraordinary: numerous essays and books published during the last two decades on issues ranging from postmodernism and multiculturalism to the philosophy of language and political theory have been directly inspired and guided by Berlin's work. After his death in 1997, there was an outpouring of admiring assessments of his impact, all underscoring Berlin's far-reaching importance as a scholar and even as a public intellectual. Christopher Clausen, for example, in an encomium for *The New Leader* wittily called "Ich bin ein Berliner," claimed that Berlin was "one of the founders and most distinguished practitioners of the history of ideas."⁵ Leon Wieseltier went further, calling him "the most original, the most lucid, the most erudite, and the most relentless enemy of the idea of totality in his age, which was an age of totality." Indeed, Wieseltier

³ Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason. The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵ Christopher Clausen, "Ich bin ein Berliner," *The New Leader*, December 14, 1998, 9.

dubbed Berlin “a world-historical thinker.”⁶ Still today Berlin has legions of admirers and, thanks to the tireless efforts of his literary executor and editor Henry Hardy, books by Berlin continue to appear at a regular pace, almost giving the impression that he continues to write beyond the grave. Just three years ago, George Crowder reviewed a number of these recent additions to the Berlin corpus and also stressed his importance as an intellectual historian. But Crowder added:

Berlin’s brilliance as an historian should not, however, blind us to his significance in political thought. Most of his work, however extraordinary its range, can be seen to fall within, or to emerge out of, a single overarching project. . . . The project is a search for the origins of twentieth-century totalitarianism. For Berlin, these are primarily intellectual origins. While he does not discount sociological and material factors, Berlin’s emphasis is on “the power of ideas.” Ideas, beliefs and values matter, he insists, and matter enormously.⁷

Berlin’s prestige and influence principally rest on the support of these twin pillars: that he was a consummate historian of ideas but one who went beyond mere scholarship by showing how that history and those ideas had traceable consequences for the lives of real people, by demonstrating, as Crowder puts it, that ideas matter. More specifically, Berlin’s enduring preoccupation with the intellectual origins of modern totalitarianism in its many guises resulted in what many regard as his most significant work. Gertrude Himmelfarb expressed a widely-held view when she wrote that Berlin’s

essays on the “Counter-Enlightenment” (the term is Berlin’s) may be his major contribution to intellectual history, for he resurrects thinkers—Vico, Herder, Hamann, de Maistre—who have been neglected by the dominant school of liberal philosophy. These thinkers differed profoundly among themselves, but they shared a pluralistic view of society and history that made them sympathetic to nationalism rather than universalism, romanticism rather than

⁶ Leon Wieseltier, “When a sage dies, all are his kin,” *The New Republic*, December 1, 1997, 27.

⁷ George Crowder, “Hedgehog and Fox,” *Australian Journal of Political Science* 38 (2003), 334.

rationalism, and, in some cases, authoritarianism rather than liberalism.⁸

Largely on the strength of Berlin's considerable reputation, then, this view of the Counter-Enlightenment, and his evaluation of the figures he identified with it, have become axiomatic. It has become a truism so fully absorbed within scholarly opinion that it has virtually assumed the status of an indisputable fact. For this reason only can Graeme Garrard write in praise of Berlin's achievement while simultaneously shaking his head that he "devoted much of his remarkable scholarly career to exploring the ideas of a rogues' gallery of Counter-Enlightenment figures such as Maistre, Hamann and Fichte" and wondering how to explain "Berlin's fascination with these unsavoury figures."⁹

It is a fair question, and to address it, it seems appropriate to begin at the beginning. What *is* the Counter-Enlightenment? In the introduction to one of the anthologies of Berlin's essays, Roger Hausheer reminds us that: "It is in the German world that Berlin sees the revolt against the central Enlightenment dogmas as really taking hold. . . . It was the great counter-rationalist J. G. Hamann who first did this consciously. He was against all abstractions."¹⁰ Berlin himself used even more colorful language to characterize Hamann's stance. In the eponymous essay, "The Counter-Enlightenment," Berlin tells us: "If Vico wished to shake the pillars on which the Enlightenment of his times rested, the Königsberg theologian and philosopher J. G. Hamann wished to smash them."¹¹ Similarly, Berlin says that "Hamann took little interest in theories or speculations about the external world; he cared only for the inner personal life of the individual, and therefore only for art, religious experience, the senses, personal relationships, which the analytic truths of scientific reason seemed to him to reduce to meaningless ciphers."¹² In a related essay titled "Hume and the Sources of German Anti-Rationalism," Berlin similarly asserts:

⁸ Gertrude Himmelfarb, "A Philosopher with a Difference: Isaiah Berlin," *The Wilson Quarterly* 20 (1996): 73.

⁹ Graeme Garrard, "The Counter-Enlightenment," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 2 (1997): 286–87.

¹⁰ Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind. An Anthology of Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer, Foreword Noel Annan, Intro. Roger Hausheer (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), xxix.

¹¹ Berlin, "The Counter-Enlightenment," in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, 248.

¹² *Ibid.*, 250.

Hamann attempted no less than a total reversal of the values of the Enlightenment; in the place of the abstract and general he wished to place the particular and the concrete: in place of the theoretical constructions, stylised patterns and idealised entities of the philosophers and scientists—the directly given, the unmediated, the sensuous. He was in the strict sense of the term a reactionary; that is, he wished to return to an older tradition of the ages of faith: quality in place of quantity, primacy of the given, not of the analytic intellect, the immediately perceived secondary qualities, not the inferred primary ones; the free imagination, not logic.¹³

I think these several passages give a fair idea of Berlin's overall conception of Hamann and of the intellectual climate of his time. But if one takes a closer look at the way in which Berlin constructs his arguments, marshals evidence for (or against) his theses and uses source material, several general features begin to stand out. First of all, Berlin rarely analyzes a single work by an individual writer, including Hamann, at length or in any detail. Instead, as we just saw, he develops broad themes, painting in large strokes, rarely stopping to engage in a close or patient reading of a particular text. And one may have also noticed that, in all of the above, Berlin did not actually quote anything from Hamann himself. Indeed, Berlin warns us that Hamann wrote "in a highly idiosyncratic, perversely allusive, contorted, deliberately obscure style, as remote as he could make it from the, to him, detestable elegance, clarity and smooth superficiality of the bland and arrogant French dictators of taste and thought."¹⁴ The reader would thus be forgiven for thinking that Berlin was merely offering a helpful précis or synopsis of Hamann's views, rendering his obscure, oracular pronouncements in a more accessible and comprehensible idiom. Occasionally Berlin will illustrate his general point with a quotation, but it is usually very brief, often consisting of only a few words, and almost never accompanied by an indication of the context in which they originally occur. On more than a few occasions this practice produces some very revealing results. Let me offer an example.

While discussing Hamann's views on language, Berlin at one point un-

¹³ Isaiah Berlin, "Hume and the Sources of German Anti-Rationalism," in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy, Intro. Roger Hausheer (London: Pimlico, 1997), 170.

¹⁴ Berlin, "The Counter-Enlightenment," 249.

derscores the ostensibly individualistic, non-rational, unsystematic nature of Hamann's thought, thereby seeking to substantiate further Hamann's credentials as an opponent of Enlightenment universalism: "Language," Berlin writes, as if elaborating Hamann's own opinion on the matter, "is the direct expression of societies and peoples"; and here Berlin inserts a quote by Hamann: "'every court, every school, every profession, every corporation, every sect has its own language'; we penetrate the meaning of this language by the passion of 'a friend, an intimate, a lover,' not by rules, imaginary universal keys which open nothing."¹⁵ The implication is obviously that, by stating that "every court, every school, every profession, every corporation, every sect has its own language" which can be understood only by "a friend, an intimate, a lover," Hamann meant that language as such is radically culturally determined and thus inaccessible to anyone unfamiliar with that culture, and that Hamann believed that language in general is unyielding to an analysis informed by abstract laws and principles.

Yet if one looks at the source and context of these two brief, fragmentary quotations, a far different picture emerges from the one Berlin sketches with regard both to the details and to the larger outlines of Hamann's thought. The words are drawn from a short essay, or "Letter" as Hamann called it, entitled "Clover Leaf of Hellenistic Letters," which he wrote in 1759 and published as part of the compilation that appeared under the general title *Crusades of a Philologist* in 1762. Hamann, who was at the time engaged in an intensive study of Greek, Hebrew and Arabic—he already knew Latin, French, and English—was in fact immensely learned as well as pious and he was both curious and well-informed about the rapidly-moving developments taking place in contemporary theology and biblical criticism. But Hamann wanted to preserve a balance between reason and revelation, making it possible for faith and understanding to complement rather than to negate each other. And it was with that intention that he wrote the "Letter" in response to a debate taking place in biblical scholarship during the 1750s concerning the character of New Testament Greek, or Koine, versions of which were spoken and written throughout the ancient world for nearly a thousand years. Mid-eighteenth-century scholars such as G. D. Kypke, Albert Schultens and especially Johann David Michaelis had argued before Hamann that, given the significant variations Koine exhibits over the period of its existence and in the many regions

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 252–53. Cf. also footnote 49 in this essay.

where it was used, it could not be regarded as an unblemished vehicle suitable to divine revelation. At stake in this academic dispute, therefore, was nothing less than the sacred status of the holy texts. Hamann's introductory comments to his own discussion of this issue are noteworthy for their reasoned, dispassionate and objective—in a word, scholarly—tone:

The dispute about the language and style of the New Testament is not entirely unfamiliar to me. I thus doubt that a linguistic approach alone will suffice to resolve the conflicting opinions. One must not only know what good Greek is . . . but also what language in general is, not only what the eloquence of a classical author is, but also what style in general is. There are few philosophical insights into either subject. The lack of basic principles, however, is generally responsible for academic quarrels.¹⁶

In other words, Hamann was proposing that, in order to settle the question about Koine in particular, one would need to recognize and proceed according to “basic principles” concerning “language in general,” and to do so by establishing or at least identifying “basic principles” upon which any further investigations could be based. One such principle is that it is in the nature of language that it always exhibits differences according to the historical and geographical circumstances in which it occurs. Far from disqualifying Koine as a legitimate medium of revelation, the fact that it changes according to the place and time it is employed actually validates its authenticity, for such variety and change are hallmarks that every language exhibits. As Hamann wrote, one need only compare the universal language of his own day, namely French, to see that such variation is endemic in language as such:

French is as common in our times as Greek was formerly. How could it not degenerate in London and Berlin just as Greek was spoken poorly in Jewish lands, especially in Galilee? The intention, time, and place of an author all determine his expression. Courts, schools, trades and commerce, private guilds, groups, and sects all have their own vocabularies.¹⁷

¹⁶ Johann Georg Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Josef Nadler (Vienna: Herder Verlag, 1949–57), 2:169.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

Once this basic principle is understood, Hamann is saying—namely, that language is never static or “pure,” that it is subject to historical, regional, even social variation—then it will be possible to look past the linguistic surface of the Scriptures and perceive their internal, divine message, but only if one knows how and where to look, only if one has eyes sharpened by knowledge and desire for the divine truth:

If therefore the divine style also chooses foolish, vapid, base means in order to put the powers and ingenuity of all profane writers to shame, then one certainly needs the inspired, enthusiastic, jealous eyes of a friend, a confidant, a lover to recognize the rays of divine splendor in such a disguise.¹⁸

All three “Letters,” and indeed the entire *Crusades of a Philologist*, revolve around this set of questions, and Hamann’s procedure is to adduce evidence based on several fundamental assumptions about the nature of language as an expression of our humanity that support his religious convictions. In another short piece included in the *Crusades*, titled “Essay on an Academic Question,” Hamann seeks to further bolster his position by asserting: “There must exist similarities among all human languages that are based on the uniformity of our nature and similarities that are necessary in the smaller spheres of society.”¹⁹ If such similarities did not exist, Hamann is saying, there would be no basis for comparison, no common ground for evaluation, indeed no possibility for communication or understanding at all. And in case you think that I am making Hamann sound more clear or lucid in English than he is in the original, here is the above quotation in Hamann’s words: “Es muß . . . Ähnlichkeiten unter allen menschlichen Sprachen geben, die sich auf die Gleichförmigkeit unserer Natur gründen, und Ähnlichkeiten, die in kleinen Sphären der Gesellschaft nothwendig sind.” There are no doubt several things one might say about this statement, but that it is “highly idiosyncratic, perversely allusive, contorted, deliberately obscure” does not spring first to mind.

Hamann’s actual words, as well as the entire tenor of his argument—in addition to the obvious fact that he *is* making a reasoned argument of some subtlety—obviously square rather badly with the assertion Berlin makes in “The Counter-Enlightenment” essay and elsewhere that “Hamann’s theses rested on the conviction that all truth is particular, never general: that rea-

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 121–22.

son is impotent to demonstrate the existence of anything and is an instrument only for conveniently classifying and arranging data in patterns to which nothing in reality corresponds."²⁰ Indeed, as we have seen, precisely the opposite is true.

Hamann occupies a special place in Isaiah Berlin's pantheon—or his "rogues' gallery," as Graeme Garrard so memorably put it—but of even greater significance is Herder. As Roger Hausheer puts it, "For Berlin, Herder is of central importance."²¹ Berlin returned to him again and again, in essay after essay, but always with the same basic aim: to show not only that Herder was a confirmed opponent of the Enlightenment, but that he was the originator of a number of ideas that arose out of that opposition which went on to influence later generations of illiberal, irrational and ultimately totalitarian thinkers. Hamann may have provided the first impetus for this development in Berlin's view, but it was Herder who brought it to fruition.

But the problems with Berlin's handling of evidence with regard to Hamann are, if anything, even more acute in his treatment of Herder. As he does in his essays on Hamann, Berlin typically proceeds in his discussions of Herder by sketching out general themes, or rather by reiterating always the same theme: that Herder, unlike the rationalistic, materialistic, and cosmopolitan representatives of the Enlightenment, championed an emotive, holistic, and nationalist, or at least pluralist, view of the human and natural sphere. Again, in making these claims, Berlin rarely descends to the level of actual textual analysis, and even less frequently refers to Herder's own words to substantiate or even illustrate them. Indeed, much as he had done with Hamann, Berlin implies that he is merely creating order out of Herder's own inspired, but cluttered prose. "He is a rich, suggestive, prolix, marvellously imaginative writer," Berlin assures us, "but seldom clear or conclusive. His ideas are often confused, sometimes inconsistent, never wholly specific or precise."²² Still, when Berlin does cite Herder's words, one might reasonably expect them to provide a privileged, if somewhat opaque, window into Herder's thinking. Such instances actually do reveal a great deal, but in ways that Berlin surely did not intend.

In an essay titled "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West," for ex-

²⁰ Berlin, "The Counter-Enlightenment," 249.

²¹ Hausheer, Introduction to Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, xxx.

²² Berlin, "Herder and the Enlightenment," *The Proper Study of Mankind*, 429. This essay is identical with the long section on Herder in Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (New York: Viking, 1976), which itself is a slightly revised and expanded version of the same essay published under the same title in 1965.

ample, Berlin returns to his favorite subject, saying that, in contrast to the Enlightenment project of a universal anthropology, Herder believed that there could be no comprehensive, unified “science of man,” because he thought there was no one thing that could be called “man” across all cultures and historical epochs. Berlin explains:

[Herder] maintained that values were not universal; every human society, every people, indeed every age and civilization, possesses its own unique ideals, standards, way of living and thought and action. There are no immutable, universal, eternal rules or criteria of judgement in terms of which different cultures and nations can be graded in some single order of excellence.²³

A little further on, Berlin injects a few of Herder’s own words into what we are meant to assume is a paraphrase of Herder’s thought: “The qualities which men have in common are not sufficient to ensure the fulfilment of a man’s or people’s nature, which depends at least as much on the characteristics due to the place, the time and the culture to which men uniquely belong; to ignore or obliterate these characteristics is to destroy men’s souls and bodies equally.”—and here Berlin inserts the quote by Herder—“‘I am not here to think, but to be, feel, live!’ For Herder every action, every form of life, has a pattern which differs from that of every other.”²⁴

“I am not here to think, but to be, feel, live!” These eleven words constitute the sum total of Herder’s own contribution to the position Berlin ascribed to him here. Granted, they do seem to convey an irrational, vitalistic standpoint, even to imply a reversal of Descartes’s famous dictum, and to that extent they could be understood to encapsulate the essence of the “Counter-Enlightenment” program. Berlin clearly thought that these few words effectively did just that since he recycled them in various essays, such as one called “The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will,” where Berlin informs us: “The sages of Paris reduce both knowledge and life to systems of contrived rules, the pursuit of external goods, for which men prostitute themselves, and sell their inner freedom, their authenticity; . . . This is the bitter atmosphere in which Herder writes: ‘I am not here to think, but to be, feel, live!’ ”²⁵

²³ Isaiah Berlin, “The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West,” in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 37.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 39–40.

²⁵ Berlin, “The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will,” *The Proper Study of Mankind*, 567.

But if one goes to the original source of this quote (which Berlin does dutifully cite in a footnote, but by identifying only the volume and page number of the edition where it can be found), one discovers a remarkable thing. It turns out that those eleven words are not contained in any of the numerous works Herder wrote on aesthetics, linguistics, epistemology, history, theology, or practical criticism. In fact they are not even from a piece of expository writing at all, but instead from an unpublished poem originally sent in a letter to his wife, Caroline, in 1772. The poem, “St. Johannis Nachtstraum,” or “Saint John’s Night’s Dream,” is composed in what one could only charitably call the style of the most fashionable poet of the day, Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock. Readers of Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which was published two years after Herder had written the letter to his wife, will recall the scene in which Charlotte and Werther witness a thunderstorm together and, overcome with emotion, Charlotte lays her hand on Werther’s and utters “Klopstock!”²⁶ Indeed, the same poem Charlotte is thinking of, “Die Frühlingsfeier,” is the direct inspiration of Herder’s own effort. Klopstock’s poem celebrates the glory of God’s creation as it is manifest not just in the vastness of the universe and in displays of great natural power, such as thunderstorms, but also as it is revealed in his tiniest creatures, such as the earthworm, or “Frühlingswürmchen.” That image obviously appealed to Herder—we should also remember that Herder was a pastor—and in his poem, “St. Johannis Nachtstraum” Herder evoked the “most beautiful summer night” by describing the glowworms one can often see during that season as “the glowing spark of God, the summer worm!”²⁷ (Hence the title of the poem: in addition to the more common “Glühwürmchen,” another word in German for “glowworm” or “firefly” is “Johanniswürmchen.”) In Klopstock’s poem the theological question was raised “whether the tiny golden worm has a soul.”²⁸ Herder, in his version, goes one step further and has the firefly itself consider this spiritual conundrum, and it asks whether its mysterious glow might be its immortal essence, rising up after its death to become an angel. I quote the firefly’s words, in which it addresses its own, perhaps immortal luminescence, only then to realize that, because it is an insect, it really ought not to ponder such weighty matters:

²⁶ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Die Leiden des Jungen Werther*. Hamburger Ausgabe, ed. Erich Trunz et al. (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1981), 6: 27.

²⁷ Johann Gottfried Herder, “St. Johannis Nachtstraum,” *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. Bernhard Suphan (Berlin: Weidmannsche Verlagsgesellschaft), 29: 364–65.

²⁸ Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, *Sämmtliche Werke* (Leipzig: Göschen, 1839), 4: 117.

Fleuchst Funke du fort,
wenn mein Wurmkörper auch hin ist,
bist auch bestimmt, aus Grabesnacht
ein Würmchen zum Engel zu erlösen? —
 All meine Sinnen sind verschlossen!
Um meine Sinn' ist Sommernacht!
Bin nicht zu denken hier! zu seyn! zu fühlen!
zu leben! mich zu freun!²⁹

Do you, spark, fly away
when my worm body is also gone
are you destined to redeem out of grave's night
a little worm as an angel? —
 All of my senses are closed!
All around my senses is the summer night!
I am not here to think! to be! to feel!
to live! to be happy.

The phrase that Isaiah Berlin tells us sums up Herder's forceful rejection of the Enlightenment ideal, Herder's emphatic repudiation of sterile rationality, indeed one of the principal slogans of the "Counter-Enlightenment," comes, it turns out, from the soliloquy of a self-effacing insect.

This is an extreme example of Berlin's practice, but hardly an isolated or unrepresentative one. I admit that I did not choose it entirely at random, but because it illustrates so dramatically some of the basic features of his approach and thus of his conclusions. However, since those conclusions and in general Berlin's entire narrative of the Counter-Enlightenment, have formed the basis for a large and constantly growing number of ostensibly serious works of scholarship, it seems appropriate to ask whether those works rest on precarious foundations. As we have seen, the stakes are high: a significant number of sober-seeming analyses of modern political developments supported by apparently solid historical research depend on Berlin's account of "the Enlightenment" and of Herder's alleged rejection of it. And although I am mainly concerned with the notion of the Counter-Enlightenment here, Berlin's tendentious and misinformed reading of Herder and of his place within the German and European intellectual tradition has been influential regarding other ideas as well, especially the highly ambiguous concept of "pluralism."

²⁹ Herder, "St. Johannis Nachtstraum," 29: 366.

One such study that is openly indebted to Berlin is a book by Bhikhu Parekh, called *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, which came out in 2000 with Harvard University Press. Following a chapter on what Parekh calls “Moral Monism”—a Berlinesque formulation and shorthand for a rationalistic universalism, which he predictably finds “a deeply flawed response to moral and cultural diversity”³⁰—Parekh then turns to an historical account of the more congenial “Forms of Pluralism.” This chapter is devoted to an examination of Vico, Montesquieu, and, most importantly, Herder. For, according to Parekh, “Herder surpassed both in his appreciation of the wholeness and diversity of cultures. He rejected the monist view that cultures were so many different byproducts of a universally shared human nature.”³¹ The implications of this view are evident: in Herder’s understanding, writes Parekh, “to be human was to grow up within a particular cultural community and become a particular kind of person. The abstract and universally shared human nature, which supposedly underlay and remained unchanged across cultures as the Enlightenment thinkers had argued, was a fiction.”³² Together with this emphasis on the radical particularity, indeed singularity, of each cultural entity that Parekh ascribes to Herder is an equally thoroughgoing insistence that every cultural entity possessed its own intrinsic and incommensurable worth. “Each culture, according to Herder, was valuable because of what it was, and not as a stepping stone to an allegedly higher culture or as a stage in a grand historical teleology. Its sole concern should be to be true to itself and live by its own highest values, and it must be judged by its own standards.”³³ Summing up, Parekh informs us: “Like Vico and Montesquieu but at a deeper level than both, Herder highlighted the inadequacy of the traditional conception of human nature. He insisted that since human beings were culturally embedded, human nature was not a uniform substratum underlying and remaining unaffected by culture as most monist philosophers since Plato had imagined.”³⁴

Now, all of this might sound attractive enough at first glance. The problem is that none of it is true. Here, from the fifteenth book of his *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Humanity* of 1787, is what Herder actually says about “human nature”: “Human nature always remains the

³⁰ Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism. Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 50.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

³² *Ibid.*, 68.

³³ *Ibid.*, 71.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

same; in the ten-thousandth year of the world he is born with passions just as he was born with passions in the second one.”³⁵ (The belief in the basic uniformity of human nature was of course a commonplace during the Enlightenment, and we remember that even Hamann had spoken affirmatively of “the uniformity of our nature.”³⁶) And not only did Herder think that the basic constituents of human nature were always and everywhere fundamentally the same, but he also believed, contrary to Parekh’s and Berlin’s notion that Herder thought each culture had its own inviolable standards of worth, that our human nature and thus our collective culture inherently, indeed necessarily strove toward a common goal: what Herder called “Humanität.” As he categorically stated: “humanity is the purpose of our human nature.”³⁷ Herder insists on this commonality among human beings across time and place: “Our nature is organized for this apparent purpose”—meaning that of attaining “Humanität”—: “for it we are given our finer senses and drives, our reason and freedom, our delicate and lasting health, our language, art, and religion. In all circumstances and societies man has absolutely nothing other in view, cannot undertake anything other than humanity, however he may have thought of the same.”³⁸

The centrality of the notion of a shared “Humanität” common to all human beings—albeit inherent in us as a potential and goal toward which we all do, or rather should, strive—is a sentiment, or rather a conviction, that Herder constantly repeated throughout his life and in fact constitutes one of the main pillars of his thought. Far from disagreeing with the principal ideas of the Enlightenment, Herder in fact spent his life arguing for their value and necessity in a country and a time that he thought sorely lacked them. This is no less true for Herder’s earliest works, when he was supposedly most skeptical about the Enlightenment. As early as 1769, in his autobiographical *Journal of my Travels*, chronicling his trip to France, he envisioned a “Yearbook of Writings for Humanity,” calling it “a great plan! an important work!” that would offer “only that which is closest to humanity, helps to enlighten it, raise it to a new height, guide it to a certain new aspect, shows it in a new light.”³⁹ “What a great theme, to show that in order to be what one should be, one needs to be neither Jew, nor Arab, nor Greek, nor savage, nor martyr, nor pilgrim; but rather only the enlight-

³⁵ Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (Munich: Hanser, 2002) 3,1: 578.

³⁶ Hamann, 2: 121–22.

³⁷ Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, 3,1: 580.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 3,1: 581.

³⁹ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Sämtliche Werke*, 4: 367.

ened, informed, fine, rational, educated, virtuous, appreciative human being that God demands at our stage of culture.”⁴⁰ The historian’s task, in Herder’s understanding of it, was to try to achieve two seemingly contradictory goals at once: on the one hand to take seriously the almost infinite variety and complexity manifested by all human endeavors everywhere in the world and simultaneously to be attentive to the differences that distinguish nations, cultures, as well as individuals from each other, but on the other hand to try to locate, within this multiplicity, the fundamental laws that govern all human behavior and thought, to try to locate the basic components that make humans—human.

There is probably not much point in continuing to cite the innumerable passages in Herder that explicitly refute the views that Berlin and, following his lead, many others have falsely ascribed to him. What is more important is to ask how this misrepresentation occurred in the first place and what it might tell us about the theoretical and historical underpinnings of the idea of the Counter-Enlightenment itself. Part of the answer to the first question has to do, quite simply, with shoddy scholarship. It is, to put it bluntly, scandalous that people who would regard themselves as scholars make confident assertions about thinkers whose works they clearly do not know first-hand. It is no less alarming that some of our most distinguished university presses are abetting this travesty by publishing these works. It *is* true that neither Hamann nor Herder is easy to read. For one thing, they wrote in German, and there are no complete translations into English of the works of either one, and Hamann in particular liberally interspersed his texts with quotations from the many languages he knew. But it should be a minimal requirement in writing about Herder and Hamann, or anyone else for that matter, that one actually read what they wrote. And it is also true that neither was a systematic thinker of the stripe of Kant, and one must read over a wide range and number of works by Herder to begin to form an adequate appreciation of his thought. But that still cannot explain the chasm between the picture Berlin and his followers offer of Herder or Hamann and one based more on their own words and ideas. The answer lies, I think, in the notion of the Counter-Enlightenment itself, to which Berlin may have given the name, but which had already been fully elaborated as an interpretive model and which he needed only to translate for those who had no access to the original.

John Gray, another of Berlin’s admirers and exponents, once asserted

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 364–65.

(again with the kind of unqualified, but misplaced, confidence in the substance of his remarks we have come to recognize as a hallmark of Berlin's adherents): "The Counter-Enlightenment is coeval with the Enlightenment itself."⁴¹ That, too, is simply not true. As an explanatory paradigm, if not in actual name, the "Counter-Enlightenment" came into existence much later than the Enlightenment itself and was part of an ideological program carried out in the guise of historical analysis.⁴² It did not arise as a merely neutral designation, a value-free explanatory term. It was, rather, a fundamentally partisan construct from the very beginning, one designed to shape the present through an activist, which is to say ideologically biased, reading of the past. At its inception, the notion of the Counter-Enlightenment, which seems merely to describe contemporary, that is eighteenth-century, opposition to the Enlightenment, was in fact fashioned as a weapon in a twentieth-century campaign to destroy it.

I am referring to the interpretation, or rather the distortion, of Herder's thought that emerged with the rise of German *Geistesgeschichte* at the end of the nineteenth century and became part of an even larger frontal assault against the legacy of the Enlightenment more generally within German intellectual life during the early part of the twentieth century. The historicist attack on Enlightenment values was eminently political in its intention and effect, and it saw, or wanted to see, Herder as an authenticating precursor and ideological ally. That is, the depiction of Herder as the great original genius, as the advocate of feeling over reason, as the promoter of the value of particularity, especially of national particularity, over universal cosmopolitanism, as the champion of an utterly new way of seeing and interpreting the world and humanity: this tale, championed by Berlin as historical fact, was wholly the invention of German nationalist historians who wanted to identify the roots of a specifically German modern culture, one that was absolutely different from, and it goes without saying superior to, the supposedly superficial, bloodless, soulless and mechanistic worldview those German historians attributed to the Enlightenment, and most particularly to the French *philosophes*. German feeling versus French rationality,

⁴¹ John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 123.

⁴² A recent volume of essays has been devoted to the subject: *Isaiah Berlin's Counter-Enlightenment*, ed. Joseph Mali and Robert Wokler (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2003). However, the book is less helpful than it might appear. In the promising-sounding article by Frederick Beiser, "Berlin and the German Counter-Enlightenment," not a single word is ever quoted by either Hamann or Herder to support Beiser's contention that "these thinkers were sharp critics of the claims of reason made by the *Aufklärung*." (106)

German profundity versus French shallowness, German *Kultur* versus French *Zivilisation*. And behind all of these objections stood the French Revolution and everything it implied, particularly its ideals of free and equal citizens in a self-governing republic. The connection between the ideas we associate with the Counter-Enlightenment and the origins of fascism is real, but the historical timeline connecting them is off by more than one hundred years.

Perhaps the earliest, and certainly one of the most influential, expressions of the idea that there was an autonomous and specifically German intellectual development that took place during the last third of the eighteenth century is contained in the inaugural lecture, or “Antrittsvorlesung,” held in Basel in 1867 by the father of *Geistesgeschichte*, Wilhelm Dilthey. Its title, “The Poetic and Philosophical Movement in Germany 1770–1800,” is programmatic: Dilthey asserted that in those thirty years there was what he called “an intellectual movement” propelled by what he identified as the “drive to found a view of life and the world in which the German spirit would find its fulfilment.”⁴³ Later on, Dilthey specified in what this “drive” consisted: “to form a new ideal of life—to ask about the meaning of man—about the content of a truly valuable life, about genuine culture.” Although Dilthey does refer rather noncommittally to Herder in his lecture, he neither mentions Hamann, who at that point had been almost entirely forgotten, nor is he overtly hostile toward the Enlightenment as a whole. In fact, Dilthey frequently uses the word “Aufklärung,” not to refer to the entire period or era as we do now, but rather transitively, as in “the enlightenment of ideas” or the “enlightenment of concepts.”⁴⁴ But Dilthey’s claims for the novelty and authenticity of the “movement” he had identified made it necessary to show how precisely it differed from, and of course superseded, what had come before.

It fell to a student of Dilthey, Herman Nohl, to articulate what his teacher had thus merely implied. In 1911, Nohl published “The German Movement and the Idealistic Systems”—“Die Deutsche Bewegung und die idealistischen Systeme”—which announces its allegiance to Dilthey by its very title. But the shift in emphasis, though apparently slight, is important: no longer a movement merely *in* Germany, it is now one that *is* German in its essence and meaning. Tellingly, the first two sentences of Nohl’s essay read like the opening of a political manifesto, which in a way it was:

⁴³ Wilhelm Dilthey, “Die dichterische und philosophische Bewegung in Deutschland 1770–1800,” *Gesammelte Schriften* (Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner, 1957), 5: 13.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 18, 19.

The new epoch after the Enlightenment begins wherever “life,” understood as a fundamentally individual, irrational totality and which is accessible only to the totality of experience, is opposed to “reflection,” the understanding as the power that establishes all certainty, to abstraction and demonstration of rationalism, on the one hand, and to psychological and scientific analysis on the other. The situation was generally seen thus: not only that the understanding, with its divisions and oppositions, destroys life, which is a unified whole: [but also that] the sovereignty of the understanding in the Enlightenment really did fragment the unity of life, and that the task was to restore this unity—in man with regard to his faculties, in society with regard to individual people, and finally among man, nature and god.⁴⁵

Here Dilthey’s fairly benign emphasis on “life” has become codified and radicalized into what is plainly cast as an ideological struggle: in Nohl’s account, the Enlightenment is a kind of despotic regime governed by the absolute “power” and “sovereignty” of abstract reason, which has fragmented and atomized the previously intact wholeness of “life.” And the task of the “Deutsche Bewegung,” Nohl makes clear, was nothing less than to restore the vital unity of life that was rent asunder by the caustic dissolution of rational analysis.⁴⁶ Not surprisingly, Hamann was one of Nohl’s heroes, and in another work Nohl referred to Hamann as “one of the most irrational men who have ever lived.”⁴⁷ Needless to say, he meant it as a compliment.

⁴⁵ Herman Nohl, “Die Deutsche Bewegung und die idealistischen Systeme,” *Logos. Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie der Kultur* 2 (1911/1912), 350.

⁴⁶ It is significant that in his indispensable reference book on the so-called “Conservative Revolution” in Germany, Armin Mohler treats the notion of the “German Movement” as a subset of that larger phenomenon, and at one point considered using the latter phrase to designate the entire period instead of the one he eventually chose. As Mohler explained: “If here the name ‘German Movement’ is used above all in the sense of a subdivision of ‘Conservative Revolution,’ its exclusionary function is not being ignored. For large parts of the German ‘Conservative Revolution,’ the battle against the ideas of the French Revolution and thus of the European Enlightenment was a battle against an externally imposed ‘infiltration of foreign elements’ [*Überfremdung*], which thus becomes an attempt to regain a ‘Germanness’ that had been buried for decades or even centuries.” Armin Mohler, *Die Konservative Revolution in Deutschland 1918–1932. Ein Handbuch* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), 15.

⁴⁷ Herman Nohl, *Die Deutsche Bewegung. Vorlesungen und Aufsätze zur Geistesgeschichte von 1770–1830*, ed. Otto Friedrich Bollnow and Frithjof Rodi (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1970), 95.

In 1911, the same year Nohl's essay appeared, a massive study on Hamann was published by Rudolf Unger called *Hamann und die Aufklärung*, which single-handedly brought the long-neglected Hamann into the forefront of scholarly attention and established the framework in which Hamann has been largely understood ever since. Indeed, the book and its approach have been considered "paradigmatic" for the entire period, and forty years after its appearance, in an article devoted to "Geistesgeschichte" for a lexicon on German literature, Paul Kluckhohn still called it "probably the best and most profound exposition of German intellectual life of the pre-Classical period."⁴⁸ Unger's book is thus significant in several respects, not least of which is that it is one of the few works of scholarship that Isaiah Berlin, who refers to secondary literature even less than he cites the actual words of the figures he describes, specifically mentions.⁴⁹ Berlin even calls Unger "exceedingly erudite" and deems his book "excellent if somewhat ponderous."⁵⁰ Cloaked in the guise of dispassionate scholarship, however, *Hamann und die Aufklärung* is, in its nearly thousand-page entirety, a virulent, unremitting assault on the Enlightenment, which Unger relentlessly portrays as an aggressive, malevolent, life-threatening force bent on the negation and even the total eradication of everything that cannot be subsumed by the intellect alone:

The final goal of Enlightenment intellectualism is the most complete rationalization of the world, of life, religion and art. Strictly logical, abstract thinking and all of the sciences that rest on it—the exact study of nature, mathematics and speculative conceptual philosophy—assume control of intellectual life and dialectically seek to decompose, negate or eliminate everything that is dark and

⁴⁸ Paul Kluckhohn, "Geistesgeschichte," in *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturgeschichte*, ed. Werner Kohlschmidt and Wolfgang Mohr (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1958), 1: 538; cited from Klaus Weimar, "Das Muster geistesgeschichtlicher Darstellung. Rudolf Ungers Einleitung zu 'Hamann und die Aufklärung,'" in *Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte 1910 bis 1925*, ed. Christoph König and Eberhard Lämmert (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1993), 93.

⁴⁹ Berlin often appends substantial bibliographies to his articles, but rarely cites any scholarship within the body of his texts. An example of this practice is the original publication of the essay "The Counter-Enlightenment" in *The Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, ed. Philip Wiener (New York: Scribners, 1973–74), 2: 100–112. There Berlin lists at the end of his article over fifty works of secondary literature, not one of which is quoted or even mentioned in the article itself.

⁵⁰ Isaiah Berlin, *The Magus of the North. J. G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993), 66, 14n.

irrational by submitting it to the calculating, measuring, appraising understanding.⁵¹

Faced with such a formidable foe, Hamann would have had no choice but to rely on the inner resources of his supposedly intuitive, spontaneous personality, which Unger portrays as

naturally irrational and formless like everything elementary, ordinary, primeval, such as the child, the natural man, and prehistorical time. From it [i.e. Hamann's personality] is explained his uncompromising hatred of all rationalistic culture and art: the hatred of the elementary man against weak over-refinement and fragmentary differentiation, against all intellectual sophistication and immaterial pleasures. This elementary love of the earth and longing for heaven and this elementary hatred of the understanding is the unifying psychological source of all the brilliant intuitions and all of the semi-conscious half-truths that imbue Hamann's aesthetic spiritual world with its magical twilight.⁵²

Here Unger's bombastic, bellicose rhetoric gives him away. The "hatred" he repeatedly imputes to Hamann was in reality his own, and the true target of his animosity were the "over-refined" and "sophisticated" French. The Germans, exemplified by their proxy Hamann, were for Unger the guardians of the elemental, primeval, magical twilight, they were the defenders of authenticity and homogeneity, the natural children of history. These are notions that did come to play a noxious role in twentieth-century German history, but they do not come from Hamann. Indeed, with regard to Unger's use of words such as "decompose," "eliminate," and "fragment," coupled with his condemnation of the "calculating, measuring, appraising understanding," I think it is not too much of a stretch to detect here the faint rhetorical foreshadowing of a similar line of attack against another perceived enemy of the Germans—namely, the Jews—that was launched little more than two decades later.

It is safe to say that no one acquainted with the works of Voltaire, Diderot or Montesquieu, or even of Condillac and d'Alembert, would recognize them in Unger's or Nohl's description of the Enlightenment. But the theorists of the "Deutsche Bewegung" were not interested in actual history

⁵¹ Rudolf Unger, *Hamann und die Aufklärung* (Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1911), 235–36.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 241.

or its requirements. Particularly after the catastrophe of the First World War, this caricature of the French Enlightenment, as well as the uplifting story of the plucky rebellion against it embodied by Hamann and Herder and indeed by the entire “Deutsche Bewegung,” became a sort of secular gospel among educated Germans, retold in countless variations, but in its outlines rarely altered, much less contested.⁵³ And, for reasons that are no doubt complicated in themselves, Isaiah Berlin adopted this view essentially unchanged as his own, often repeating it, as we have seen, in phrases that are indistinguishable from anything written by Rudolf Unger.⁵⁴

In reality, there was no such thing as the Counter-Enlightenment—as Berlin describes it—at least not during the eighteenth century, and, even if there had been such a thing, Herder would have been at most a curious observer of it, and probably would have vigorously opposed it.⁵⁵ Instead, Berlin’s notion of the “Counter-Enlightenment” is a myth, a potent fiction to be sure, but a fiction nonetheless. As I have argued, it is in substance, if not in name, the creation of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historians, an interpretive schema retroactively applied to the past in their own efforts to legitimate their own anti-rational and, most significantly, anti-democratic programs. Hamann, but even more so Herder played a cen-

⁵³ See the very interesting analysis of post-war developments in historiography and the Germans’ continuing refusal to reexamine this issue in Katherine Arens, “*Geister der Zeit: The Allies’ Enlightenment and German Literary History*,” in *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 102 (2003), 336–61.

⁵⁴ In the biography by Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998), 176, there is an interesting letter Berlin wrote to a friend, Alice James, in 1951, in which he says: “Presently someone will notice how empty my activity is, the bluff will be called, the game over.” One cannot make too much of this isolated, private comment, but perhaps it is a genuine token of a deeper unease about the sources and soundness of his ideas. This speculation is bolstered by the fact that Berlin was notoriously reluctant to write—he was by all accounts a brilliant and captivating conversationalist—or to publish what he did commit to paper.

⁵⁵ The Enlightenment always had its critics, of course, particularly from the Church and from monarchical regimes. However, this is obviously not what Berlin means. Most recently, Jonathan Israel has addressed this issue: while noting, rather ambiguously, that the “Counter-Enlightenment has been little studied by historians,” he stresses that “the central thread throughout, from Bossuet’s tome onwards, is that Christendom is being destroyed by an insidious philosophical conspiracy, and that at the heart of the conspiracy is a new conception of philosophy—*l’esprit philosophique*, a universal threat, undermining the pillars of authority and tradition, that is Christian, royal, and aristocratic society.” See Jonathan I. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670–1752* (New York: Oxford UP, 2006), 38–39. See also by the same author the lengthy review essay of *The Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, ed. Alan Charles Kors et al.: Jonathan Israel, “Enlightenment! Which Enlightenment?” in *JHI* 67 (2006): 523–45.

tral role in these accounts as providing the origin and thus the historical legitimacy of the very ideas his later interpreters foisted upon him. In fact, however, Herder was a fairly typical defender of the Enlightenment aim of achieving human emancipation through the use of reason.⁵⁶ But even before the Restoration in Germany there were efforts underway not only to inhibit that goal, but to rewrite the past in order to promote far different ends in the present. It was this line of historical explanation, together with its political correlate, that proved triumphant among Wilhelminian intellectuals, and it was Herder who they made play the part of its patron saint. That was possible, however, only by applying the very same categories of understanding to Herder that were said to have been devised by him in the first place. As Claus Träger had already put it in his book from 1979 on “The Herder Legend of German Historicism”: “The ideologues of the bourgeoisie, in other words, were finally able to put Herder before the cart of reaction by applying the method of *Geistesgeschichte* to him. The circular logic is obvious: Herder could be declared the father of *Geistesgeschichte* only because he was viewed through its lens.”⁵⁷

Ideas *do* matter; they *do* have real consequences, and because they do it is important to get them right. But ideas also have histories, and frequently what we take to be the meaning of an idea is already the late product of a complicated history of interpretation, transmission, and distortion, either willful or inadvertent or both. The idea of an “irrational” Counter-Enlightenment is entirely the product of modern German *Geistesgeschichte* and through Isaiah Berlin’s unquestioning, though unspoken, reliance on its methods, aims, and conclusions, he and those who have embraced his views have paved the way for the importation of this ideologically freighted and factually challenged perception of both Herder and the Enlightenment into the Anglo-American intellectual mainstream. In this way, Berlin and his followers have unwittingly continued the work of early twentieth-century conservative German intellectuals who were bent on eradicating the legacy of the French Enlightenment, with its emphasis on the power of individual reason to advance liberty and equality, from German cultural and

⁵⁶ In fairness, it should be pointed out that within specialized scholarship on Herder in both English and in German, the notion that Herder “opposed” the Enlightenment has long been laid to rest. See my *Herder’s Aesthetics and the European Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). The book by John Zammito, *Kant, Herder and the Birth of Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), takes it as a given that Herder was a straightforward proponent of the Enlightenment.

⁵⁷ Claus Träger, *Die Herder-Legende des deutschen Historismus* (Frankfurt a.M.: Verlag Marxistische Blätter, 1979), 32.

political life. It is a bitter irony that Herder, who tirelessly devoted himself to fulfilling the ambitions of Enlightenment historiography in particular—namely, to devise by empirical means a definition of the place and significance of human beings on the earth, to tear down the dogmatic barriers erected by theological and metaphysical thinking, and to promote the progress of the political emancipation of individual citizens⁵⁸—it is, to say the least, dispiriting that this most European and ecumenical of German Enlighteners should be misidentified with the most parochial and illiberal aspects of more modern German thought. Yet it is difficult to say which is worse: that the phantasm that goes by Herder's name should be condemned by the very people he would have agreed with, or that the same apparition should be held up as an early comrade-in-arms of those, be they fascists or radical Islamists, who embrace an ideology opposed to the ideals Herder believed in and labored all his life to achieve. The Counter-Enlightenment may be alive and well today, but Herder had nothing to do with it.

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⁵⁸ See Wolfgang Pross's commentary to Herder's *Ideen* (Munich: Hanser, 2002).