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Herder's Impact on Du Bois' Conception of *Bildung*

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Abstract: While a small collection of scholars has speculated about the possibility of Herder's influence on Du Bois, the historical sources and significance of this influence have yet to be extensively examined. This article provides this missing historical account and a study of its philosophical implications. It argues that Du Bois applied Herder's concept of *Bildung* as a normative ideal to both individuals and cultures. It argues, moreover, that this *Bildung* conception contains two conflicting normative senses – one universalist, the other pluralist – and that the tension between these shapes Du Bois' notorious attempt to address the turn-of-the-century 'Negro Problem.'

Keywords: Du Bois, Herder, *Bildung*, culture, development, Negro Problem

1 Introduction

Many have noticed the uncanny similarity between the language of the author of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and the theorist of *Volksgeist*, J. G. Herder (1744–1803). Such resemblances have led various scholars to postulate Herder's influence on W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963).¹ Nevertheless, discussions of the role of German philosophy in Du Bois' thought center principally on the better-known Hegel, mentioning Herder largely in speculative, one-off remarks. Thus, it has not yet been demonstrated how, or if, Herder could have influenced Du Bois; nor has the potential impact of this influence on our understanding of Du Bois' work been probed.

In this article, I argue that Herder's ideas profoundly informed Du Bois' conceptions of human selves and cultures. This impression on Du Bois' philosophical anthropology and philosophy of culture crystalizes around the over-stretched yet potent concept of *Bildung*. This concept – generally translated into the English

1 See Rampersad 1976, 74–75; Zamir 1995, 105–106, 174; Kramer 1999, 176–180; Lemke 2000, 60–64; Gooding-Williams 2009, 140–141; Appiah 2014, 45–50.

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terms ‘development,’ ‘culture,’ ‘education,’ or ‘formation’ – was distinctively developed and popularized by Herder in the late eighteenth-century.

At the time Herder began writing, *Bildung* narrowly represented the cultivation of an individual’s capacities. He introduced three innovations to this concept. First, he dramatically widened its scope by applying it equally to the development of cultures and humanity as such. In this sense, *Bildung* indicates the end of a process of development by which all individuals and cultures could be assessed. Second, by applying *Bildung* to all human collectives, Herder pushed the concept toward our contemporary anthropological concept of culture, which describes the distinctive way of life of a human collective in non-normative terms.² Third, convinced that each human group had a distinctive vision of the good, Herder used the term *Bildung* to articulate the pluralist claim that all cultures have a unique way of life the distinctive value of which ought to be cultivated by its members and respected by others. In this regard, he provided the concept with a new normative dimension.

As we shall see, the two *normative* senses of *Bildung* – conceived as the universal end of human development and as the distinctive value of diverse cultures – live uneasily side by side. I will argue that both registers found their way a century later into Du Bois’ conception of culture, development, civilization, and education. Moreover, I will argue that the famous inconsistencies of his approach to the turn-of-the-century ‘Negro Problem’ can at least in part be attributed to the contradictions of this inheritance.³

In what follows, I begin with an analysis of the various senses and modifications of Herder’s conception of *Bildung* (§ 2) before providing a historical account of how this conception may have reached Du Bois (§ 3). I then assess the philosophical content of this influence by examining Herder and Du Bois’ conceptions of human individuals (§ 4) and cultures (§ 5). I conclude by demonstrating the consequences of Herder’s influence on Du Bois’ early approach to the ‘Negro Problem’ (§ 6).

2 Herder’s Concept of *Bildung*

The various senses of *Bildung* mentioned above are all present in Herder’s most influential work, the *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1784–1791) (henceforth *Ideas*). On a descriptive level, he used the term – alongside cognates

² Forster 2018, 162–163.

³ By “early Du Bois” I mean roughly the period from the beginning of his academic career at Harvard (1890) up to and including the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

like *Nationalbildung* (national formation), *Kultur* (culture), *Denkart* (mentality), *Nationalcharakter* (national character), and *Lebensart* (way of life) – to signify the distinctive form of life, beliefs, practices, and conventions of a people (*Volk* or *Nation*) or, in fewer instances, of an individual. For simplicity, I will henceforth refer to this form of *Bildung* as ‘culture.’

Our focus, however, is primarily on the normative senses of Herder's conception. The first, *Bildung* 1 (B1), represents *the cultivation of human capacities in view of an end that is considered a normative ideal*. Herder's innovation consisted in extending this sense of *Bildung* beyond human individuals to human groups and the development of the human species as such.⁴ He thereby contributed to the growing late eighteenth-century European trend of conceiving “the *synchronic* dispersal of cultural levels demonstrated by the travel literature [as mirroring] faithfully the *diachronic* evolution of human cultural levels.”⁵ Accordingly, he presented each human epoch and culture as inhabiting some stage of development between childhood, maturity, and old age. He writes, for instance, that “[t]here are nations (*Nationen*) in the infancy, youth, manhood, and senility of the species.”⁶ He further notes that cultures are located on higher and lower “stage[s] of development (*Stufe der Ausbildung*).”⁷ This view I will call *cultural evolutionism*.⁸

What distinguishes B1 from the anthropological sense of culture is that it is not a natural attribute but a trait which one must acquire, and one which can be obtained in various degrees. B1 is explicitly normative in the sense that its end is considered a good for all human individuals or groups. As such, it serves as a universal standard which allows for a ranking of individuals and cultures. When the contemporary English speaker claims that certain individuals or groups are ‘cultured’ or ‘civilized,’ this sense is invoked.

Herder's second innovation consisted in the introduction of another normative sense of *Bildung*, one with a pluralist thrust. *Bildung* 2 (B2) represents the *autonomous development of an agent's distinctive capacities as a normative ideal*. As in the case of B1, Herder applied this ideal to both human individuals and cultures. Unlike B1, however, B2 postulates that each individual and culture holds, at least potentially, something of distinctive value which they ought to cultivate. He often expressed this in terms of distinct cultural ‘gifts.’ Herder thus writes that “every individual human being carries within himself [...] the symmetry for which he was made and which he himself must bring to completion (*sich selbst ausbilden soll*),”

⁴ Moore 2024, liii.

⁵ Zammito 2002, 236, 331.

⁶ *Ideas*, 237.

⁷ *Ideas*, 154.

⁸ This is a somewhat contested claim that I will return to clarify and defend in § 5.

and he immediately applies this claim to cultures, noting that “each [nation] carries within itself the symmetry of its perfection, incommensurable with that of others.”⁹ In this regard, Herder’s conception of *Bildung* entails that each human being and culture must develop themselves after their own, incommensurable form of perfection, and that doing so will enrich the lives of other individuals and cultures. This view, when applied to cultures in particular, I will call *cultural pluralism*.

The table below specifies how each sense of *Bildung* functions when modified by application to individuals or cultures:

	Individuals	Cultures
Bildung 1 (B1)	An individual’s degree of development, cultivation, education, or maturity	A culture’s degree of civilization (<i>cultural evolutionism</i>)
Bildung 2 (B2)	The process of individual self-realization	A culture’s autonomous development of their distinctive vision of the good (<i>cultural pluralism</i>)

3 From Herder to Du Bois

I contend that both of Herder’s normative senses of *Bildung* found their way in to Du Bois’ philosophical anthropology and philosophy of culture. In this section, I sketch three routes for this transmission: Africana, Anglo-American, and German. I intend here to indicate why Du Bois’ conception of culture can be reasonably thought to have been derived from Herder’s conception of *Bildung*, however mediated by other theorists.

Before turning to Du Bois, however, I should note something regarding Herder’s legacy in general, which helps explain why he is often not mentioned by name despite his enormous influence. As Goethe reports, Herder’s ideas were quickly assimilated into German thought while his name was actively disremembered.¹⁰ During his lifetime, the then-dominant intellectual powerhouses and their followers – Kant, Goethe, and consequently, the German Idealists and Romantics – suppressed his influence for both theoretical and personal reasons.¹¹ After his death, during the period of 1871–1940, Herder’s reception was further muddled by German nationalists, who presented him in a racist, anti-cosmopolitan light. This unsavory

⁹ *Ideas*, 437.

¹⁰ Goethe 1914, 129.

¹¹ Arnold, Kloocke, and Menze 2009.

image limited the explicit acknowledgment of his influence throughout the twentieth century, especially post-World War II.¹² In effect, the father of German historicism became a *persona non grata*.¹³ Nevertheless, Herder's influence was sure and strong enough to be traced in W. E. B. Du Bois more than a century later – and, as we will see, it would get him into trouble as well.

Perhaps surprisingly, Du Bois' first encountered Herderian thought through Africana rather than European theory. A number of Black theorists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries re-invigorated Herder's distinctive idea that every culture – African included – has a unique gift to offer the world.¹⁴ The Caribbean-cum-Liberian man-of-letters and emigrationist Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832–1912) represents the vanguard here. Clearly echoing Herder, Blyden writes that “the idiosyncrasy of a people is a sacred gift, given for some Divine purpose, to be sacredly cherished and patiently unfolded.”¹⁵ This statement, in fact, is a quotation from a sermon of the American transcendentalist Theodore Parker.¹⁶ Parker, it is well-known, read Herder's works and popularized his approach to diversity.¹⁷ Indeed, each time Blyden speaks of racial or national ‘gifts,’ ‘genius,’ or ‘personality,’ he refers to Anglophone writers who are known to have been influenced by Herder, like Stopford Brooke, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.¹⁸

In 1891, Du Bois took Blyden's influential essay collection *Christianity, Islam, and the Negro Race* (1887) out of the Harvard library. In these essays, Blyden made the cultural gift argument three times over. We can surmise that this work made

12 Arnold, Kloocke, and Menze 2009, 398, 402. In this respect his reception is similar to Nietzsche's. For an overview of nationalist receptions of Herder, see Schneider 1994.

13 German Historicism is an intellectual movement which stretched from the mid-eighteenth century to the early twentieth century. Its representatives share the attempt to identify all aspects of human reality – including the grand concepts of human nature, morality, and reason – as products of particular socio-historical contexts. On this movement, and Herder's place within it, see Beiser 2011.

14 Chike Jeffers has instructively identified this as *The Black Gift Thesis* (Jeffers 2016, 79–97). Jeffers postulates that Herder influenced said tradition but remains agnostic on the scope of this influence. I will here provide substantial empirical evidence for the hypothesis of Herder's influence on the Africana tradition in general and Du Bois in particular.

15 Blyden 1994, 26; cf. 167–170, 317–318; see Lynch 1970, 25, 60–61.

16 Parker 1867, 201–202. I thank Trevor Pearce for bringing this to my attention.

17 Kytte 2014, 36, 51; Arnold, Kloocke, and Menze 2009, 406.

18 Blyden 1994, 26, 167–170, 317–318; Jacks 1917, 78; see Arnold, Kloocke, and Menze 2009, 405, 407; Griffith 1971, 250.

quite an impression on Du Bois, as he went on to dub Blyden “the foremost scholar of the race” in print and to adopt his language of the Negro gift.¹⁹

Anna Julia Cooper (1858–1964), who conversed with Blyden and influenced Du Bois, also promoted this position.²⁰ She writes in 1892 that, “[e]ach race has its badge, its exponent, its message, branded in its forehead by the great Master’s hand which is its own particular keynote, and its contribution to the harmony of the nations.”²¹ This Herderian idea could have stemmed not only from Blyden but also from the French historian François Guizot (1787–1874), whose tremendously influential *General History of Civilization in Europe* (1838) she often cites.²² Cooper’s work, too, is a possible source of the Herderian influence on Du Bois, as some of his claims about Black culture that echo Herder’s ideas most clearly seem to be paraphrases of Cooper’s work.²³

A more diffused Herderian reception also reached Du Bois through the mainstream of turn-of-the-century Anglo-American letters. Generally, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries represent a high-water mark of German influence on American literature and philosophy. Alongside Kant, German Idealism, and Romanticism, Herder reverberated throughout American thought through figures such as Walt Whitman as well as the aforementioned Emerson, Guizot, and Parker.²⁴ Emerson, in turn, was particularly influential for Du Bois and is even considered a potential source of Du Bois’ famous ‘double-consciousness.’²⁵

In this context, it was foremost the English essayist, Thomas Carlyle, who introduced Du Bois to Herder’s conception of *Bildung* as an ideal applicable to individuals. If there were only one lesson to be gleaned from Du Bois’ Harvard library list, it is that he was thoroughly obsessed with the conservative satirist.²⁶ Part of this draw must have been Carlyle’s ethical vision – he saw each individual as having a distinctive, God-given mission which they are tasked to fulfil by self-realization and

19 Jeffers 2010, 94–95. I thank Trevor Pearce for supplying me his recovered version of Du Bois’ Harvard library record.

20 Jeffers 2016, 82.

21 Cooper 1998, 122.

22 Cooper 1998, 122–126. We know that Guizot was influenced by Herder and that this influence can be traced in Guizot’s massively influential *General History* (Arnold, Kloocke, and Menze 2009, 410). Trevor Pearce (2020, 189) has noted this connection between Herder and Du Bois through Guizot and Cooper.

23 Jeffers 2016, 83–86.

24 Arnold, Kloocke, and Menze 2009, 405–407; Menze 2010, 27–45.

25 Bremen 1992, 80–88.

26 Du Bois’ Harvard library list shows him taking out fifteen books by Carlyle, or related to him, within a three-year span. The extent of this influence has not yet been sufficiently examined.

work.²⁷ Carlyle self-consciously and avowedly borrowed this idea from Goethe, just as Goethe had done from Herder.

Du Bois was also directly indebted to Goethe. Indeed, the latter is the most notable student of Herder with whom Du Bois deeply communed. The Frankfurt polymath attested to Herder's significance for his intellectual formation in his autobiography.²⁸ In particular, Herder's appreciation for the distinctive value of each culture had influenced Goethe's fascination with national folk literature as well as his ethical vision of the self.²⁹ The latter is brought to life in his monumental *Bildungsromane*, *Faust* (1808, 1832) and *Wilhem Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795), two of Du Bois' favorite novels.³⁰ Through Carlyle and Goethe, then, the young Du Bois absorbed the Herderian ideal of life as individual and collective self-realization.

As mentioned earlier, much has been made of the possibility of Hegel's influence on Du Bois, particularly the latter's philosophy of history and theory of double-consciousness.³¹ If such accounts hold up, and to the extent that they do, Hegel should also be considered a source of Herderian influence on Du Bois. This is because the effect of Herder on Hegel is most evident precisely in the latter's philosophical anthropology and philosophy of history.³²

In any case, a century later, Du Bois' lecturers at the Berlin Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität (now Humboldt University) demonstrated the continuing significance of Herder for German thought.³³ The courses on political economics he took with Gustav von Schmoller and Adolf Wagner carried the Herderian legacy of German Historicism, with its characteristic emphasis on the sociality of the self, the historical evolution of societies, and the psychological unity of a culture.³⁴ Indeed, I will argue below that Du Bois drew from these courses a Herderian-infused conception of human collectives, which he expressed in his famous definition of a race in "The Conservation of Races" (1897).

Herder was explicitly studied in two of Du Bois's courses at Berlin. Heinrich Von Treitschke's (1834–1896) "Politik" course (Winter 1892–93) adopted and endorsed

27 Flügel 1891, 135–139; Du Bois took this book out on April 23, 1892.

28 See Book 10 of Goethe 1948, 401; Arnold, Klocke, and Menze 2009, 391–397.

29 Goethe explicitly attributes this aspect of his thought to Herder. See Goethe and Carlyle 1887, 306. Du Bois took this book from the library on March 2, 1892.

30 Forster 2018, 209, 222–223.

31 The most careful of such arguments, in my estimation, is Gooding-Williams 1987, 99–114.

32 Taylor 1975, 13–29; Forster 2018, 239–261. This insight bears the possibility of reorienting standing conceptions of the Hegel-Du Bois relation in interesting ways, but I cannot pursue this further here.

33 Du Bois' course of study is found in Du Bois 1997, 20–26.

34 Schmoller 1894, 12; Schmoller 1893, 10–11.

him as “an unsurpassed stimulator of thought” who “taught the German nation to think historically.”³⁵ Von Treitschke openly and regrettably fused Herder’s conception of *Volk* to his own vision of politics as national self-assertion.³⁶

But Du Bois received his most extensive introduction to Herder’s ideas in Dilthey’s “Geschichte der Philosophie” course (Summer 1893), where he encountered a progressive version of Herder’s legacy.³⁷ At the very outset of both his outline for that course and his monumental *Introduction to the Human Sciences, Volume 1* (1883) (which Du Bois took out from the Berlin library in 1894) Dilthey argued that Herder began a transformation in German thought toward historical particularity and presented his own philosophical project as an attempt to provide this intuition with a firm philosophical foundation.³⁸ Elsewhere, Dilthey presented Herder’s essential innovation as follows:

Herder’s perception of the intrinsic worth of every historical stage and each form of life in every region of the earth, of the realization of happiness and perfection under the most various conditions, of the spontaneously developed (*bildenden*) forces of human nature, drove him beyond the limitations of the eighteenth century.³⁹

It is not hard to imagine that the young Du Bois, Harvard MA in history freshly in hand, would have been intrigued.

The foregoing account of Du Bois’ intellectual formation provides substantial historical evidence that he had been introduced to Herderian thought through Africana, Anglo-American, and German sources. I would like to close this argument by pointing to possible textual evidence for direct influence. One of the most famous phrases of *Souls* is uncannily similar to the closing lines of the Book 15 of the *Ideas*.⁴⁰ There, Herder illustrates the significance of historical study for an individual’s *Bildung* by means of the following allegory:

[H]istory allows us to enter these delightful groves, where we may converse and communicate with the learned and righteous of so many past ages. Here Plato stands before me; there I hear the affable Socrates and share in the fate that will ultimately befall him. When Mark Anthony

³⁵ Von Treitschke 1916, xxxiii–iv.

³⁶ Von Treitschke 1916, xxxiv–xxxv, xlii, 4, 10, 22; see Kramer 1999, 184–188.

³⁷ Pearce 2020, 184–185.

³⁸ Dilthey 1890, 1; 1922, xvi; Beck 1996, 2, footnote 4.

³⁹ Dilthey 1927, 268 (translation mine); Herder is mentioned eight times by Dilthey in his course outline for this unit alone (Dilthey 1890, 103–121).

⁴⁰ It is worth noting that Book 15 of the *Ideas* is cited in Dilthey’s aforementioned *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (Dilthey 1922, 96 n3).

speaks to his heart in private, he speaks to mine also; and poor Epictetus gives commands, mightier than a king. The tormented Tully, the unfortunate Boethius confide to me the circumstances of their lives, their afflictions, and their consolations.⁴¹

Du Bois invokes an analogous image as the final rhetorical punch of his argument for the value of higher education:

I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm and arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out of the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension.⁴²

The characters are different, but in both cases we find the image of communion with the learned of all ages as the conclusion of an argument for the importance of individual cultivation. More precisely, Du Bois seems to re-employ Herder's persuasive image of the value of history in the production of a certain type of development to demonstrate the importance of liberal education for African Americans. This suggests that Du Bois latched onto Herder precisely where the latter illustrated his conception of individual *Bildung*.

Regardless of whether the above is a reference or mere coincidence, I have provided here three historical pathways by which Du Bois was certainly exposed to Herder's ideal of *Bildung*. In the following section, I will demonstrate that this ideal became central to Du Bois' normative conception of the self and culture.

4 The Bildung of Individuals

Let me begin with an analysis of how Herder's two normative conceptions of *Bildung* (B1 and B2) inform Du Bois' approach to the self. Highlighting this connection is important, as no extant literature on the two has looked beyond their conception of culture.

Bildung 1, recall, represents *the cultivation of human capacities in view of an end that is considered a normative ideal*. When applied to individuals, B1 denotes the view that human capacities require cultivation for their perfection. By positing a normative end of human development, B1 allows for judgements that distinguish

⁴¹ *Ideas*, 452.

⁴² *Souls*, 105–106.

individuals in terms of their degree of cultivation. Herder writes, for instance, that “[a] human soul is an individual in the realm of minds: it senses in accordance with an individual formation (*Bildung*), and thinks in accordance with the strength of its mental organs. Through education these have received a certain, either good or negative, direction of their own.”⁴³

Du Bois’ commitment to B1 is clear in his project of racial uplift by a salvific class of race leaders. He envisions a cadre of “cultured men” who will cultivate the Negro masses in their image.⁴⁴ The fact that Du Bois shares B1 as applied to individuals, which is the meaning of *Bildung* that became common currency during the Enlightenment, is not remarkable.⁴⁵ What is noteworthy, however, is that Du Bois took over B2, that is, Herder’s idea of the *self-realization* of an individual’s *distinctive* capacities. B2 can be analyzed into the following components: an emphasis (i) on the self-directed nature of the development of the self, (ii) on the individuality of the self which emerges from this development, (iii) on the harmony of the cognitive and affective human capacities that result from this development, (iv) and on the importance of language in this process.⁴⁶

Herder’s commitment to B2 is an outgrowth of his conception of individuality. Drawing on Leibniz’s monadology, he conceives of each individual as unique and as containing a particular point of view:

Whoever has noticed what an *inexpressible thing* one is dealing with in the *distinctive individuality* of a human being – to be able to say *what distinguishes him in a distinguishing way*, how he feels and lives, how *different* and *idiosyncratic* all things become for him once *his* eye sees them, *his* soul measures them, *his* heart feels them.⁴⁷

From the conception of each individual as having a unique vantage on the world, it is a short step to the notion that each of them has something worth cultivating and protecting. The development of this perspective is epistemically valuable to others, he argued, since it provides them an external standpoint through which they can assess their own worldview. This more specific notion of *Bildung* was massively influential and further developed by the main representatives of German Idealism and Romanticism, including Goethe.⁴⁸

⁴³ Herder 2002, 167; 1991a, 571; cf. *Ideas*, 93.

⁴⁴ See Du Bois 2015d, 209, 220–221; *Souls*, 82.

⁴⁵ Williams 1983, 87–91.

⁴⁶ Forster 2012, 2–4.

⁴⁷ Herder 2002, 291; cf. *Ideas*, 437.

⁴⁸ Forster 2018, 222–223; cf. 367; 302–311.

Through Goethe and the other authors discussed above, this *Bildung* ideal became central to Du Bois' ethical vision of the self. As Paul Taylor observes, a thoroughgoing "perfectionism" – the cognate ethical ideal of "the perfection of character, or the complete and harmonious development of personal capacities" – is at the core of Du Bois' life-long normative framework.⁴⁹ As the young Du Bois puts it in his Berlin journal: "What is life but life, after all? *Its end is the greatest and fullest self.*"⁵⁰

Indeed, Herder's B2 provides an interpretive key to one of the most important arguments of *Souls*. Du Bois' argument for the value of liberal education in this work hinges on his claim that it sustains a particular form of human development:

[There] must persist and evolve that *higher individualism* which the centres of culture protect; there must come a loftier respect for the sovereign human soul that seeks to know itself and the world about it; that seeks a *freedom for expansion and self-development*; that will love and hate and labor *in its own way* [...]. Such souls aforesaid have inspired and guided worlds [...] [and] they shall again. Herein the longing of black men must have respect [...] [that they] may give the world new points of view.⁵¹

Here, Du Bois articulates an ideal – "higher individualism" – which brings together many of the key elements of Herder's B2 as analyzed above. He envisions the autonomous development of an individual's capacities which goes over and above 'low' individualism by its contribution to others. Thus, such individuals have "inspired and guided worlds." This notion of development emphasizes individual uniqueness, entailing that the thus cultivated soul will "love and hate and labor in its own way." Finally, the value of this form of self-realization stems from epistemic considerations, since these individuals "give the world new points of view." In other words, Herder's B2 is at the core of Du Bois' conception of education qua individual development.

5 The Bildung of Cultures

When one characterizes humans as beings whose essential capacities require development, one is immediately led to the social and cultural contexts in which this development is facilitated or inhibited. Unsurprisingly, therefore, both Herder

⁴⁹ It is central to his aesthetic philosophy in "Criteria of Negro Art" (1926), and his 1938 commencement address at Fisk University (see Taylor 2004, 104). Herder is also considered a 'moral perfectionist' (see Crowe 2012, 1142–1144).

⁵⁰ Du Bois 2007, 107, emphasis added.

⁵¹ *Souls*, 104; emphases added.

and Du Bois emphasize the sociality of the self. In this section, I will show the continuity between Herder and Du Bois' concern with individual *Bildung* and cultural *Bildung*, given their philosophical anthropologies (§ 5.1). I will then demonstrate that they share a descriptive conception of cultures as collective agents striving to realize shared values (§ 5.2), and argue that they apply the two normative senses of *Bildung* to this conception (§ 5.3). Finally, I will contend that, when applied to cultures, there is conflict between these two ideals (§ 5.4).

5.1 From Individual to Cultural Bildung

In an early and influential break with the atomistic philosophical anthropology that characterized the radical Enlightenment, Herder argued that sociality produces and constitutes our being.⁵² In short, characteristics such as dependency in infancy and childhood, sympathy, mimesis, the desire for recognition, and language reveal that “[man] is formed in and for society.”⁵³ Charles Taylor aptly names Herder's conception an “expressivist anthropology.”⁵⁴

On Herder's view, our selfhood is realized only in the context of a community and a language. One aspect of this sociality is captured by the term *recognition*, which is a loose conceptual marker for the view that our consciousness and self-consciousness are formed by our relations with others. The concept of recognition shows up in Herder's thought in at least two ways. First, he claims that our expressive exchanges with others do not merely reflect, but constitute, our consciousness and self-consciousness.⁵⁵ We thus come to recognize ourselves only in our social interactions with others. Second, the development of our identities and capacities, our *Bildung*, is determined by the ideals of our communities, from whom we desire social recognition. In the cultures of hunting peoples, for example “the boy grows up aspiring to the fame of a hunter,” and living “under the gaze of his people” spurs him to develop into just that.⁵⁶

52 Herder's revision of mainstream seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophical anthropology – as expressed, for example, in the rise of social contractualism – is prominent in the *Ideas* (cf. 210, 242), but also in *On Thomas Abbt's Writings* (1768) and *On the Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul* (1778). See Forster 2018, 70; Gjesdal 2017, 119, 121; Taylor 1975, 3–4, 13.

53 *Ideas*, 210; see Taylor 1994, 32–33.

54 Taylor 1975, 13–29.

55 Herder 2012, 167–169. For an excellent treatment of Herder's expressivism, see Spencer 2012, 43–68.

56 *Ideas*, 205.

Du Bois too emphasized the self's constitution by its relations to others.⁵⁷ This insight lies at the heart of his famous psychological account of African American leaders in *Souls*. In my view, the idea that our self-consciousness is mediated by our perception by communities of others is a causal pre-condition of Du Bois' claim that many African Americans suffer double-consciousness, that is, the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."⁵⁸ Thus, it is not the mere *fact* of recognition but the distinct *form* thereof experienced by African Americans that, according to Du Bois, produces conflictual double-consciousness.⁵⁹ This reading complicates the widespread association of Du Bois' double-consciousness with the Hegelian model of recognition, according to which the mere *fact* of recognition, that is, the act of being perceived by an other, is the source of conflict.⁶⁰ For Du Bois, much like for Herder, recognition is a benign psychological condition of the genesis of our identity and self-consciousness, but this fact produces the problem of double-consciousness in the case of racially subjugated individuals.

The upshot of this emphasis on the sociality of the self is that individuals are to a large degree contingent on a socio-cultural context which enables, guides, or suppresses their development. This leads us to Herder and Du Bois' philosophy of culture.

5.2 Philosophy of Culture

The isomorphism between Herder's notion of *Volk* and Du Bois' notion of *race* has been noted by various commentators.⁶¹ Both conceive of cultures as historically-determined, psychological communities that embody a shared perspective and strive to realize distinctive ideals. It is less conspicuous, however, that the same normative ideals which animate their approach to individuals also inform their approach to cultures, and with questionable results.

⁵⁷ This position was not unique to Du Bois. By the turn of the century, most of Du Bois' teachers emphasized the sociality of the self over and against an asocial or atomistic philosophical anthropology: it plays a key role in James' psychology and Royce's interpretation of Hegel, is accepted as common-sense by Dilthey, and expressed in the theoretical economics of Schmoller (James 1890, 294; Dilthey 1927, 266; Schmoller 1894,12; Royce 1892, 207–215).

⁵⁸ *Souls*, 3.

⁵⁹ Gooding-Williams 2009, 39.

⁶⁰ See Thomas 2025, 1–23.

⁶¹ Appiah 2014, 54–55; Kramer 1999, 176–180.

Herder famously regarded human cultures as constituted by a shared *Geist*, that is, as psychological communities distinguished by shared modes of cognition, affects, and values.⁶² This appreciation of the psychological distinctiveness of cultures was continuous with his appreciation of the distinctiveness of individuals. Sliding from individuals to nations, he writes, for instance, “what an *inexpressible thing* one is dealing with in the *distinctive individuality of a human being* [...] what depth lies in the character of just *a single nation*.”⁶³ This psychological substrate expresses itself in the activities, language, artifacts, practices, and institutions of a culture. As Herder puts it, the spirit of a nation “expresses itself through thoughts, movements, through striving, force, and effect.”⁶⁴

Most importantly, cultural communities are unified by their striving toward a distinct normative vision. Herder gives a metaphysical argument for this in Book 15 of the *Ideas*, which I referenced earlier in connection with Du Bois. He argues there that since every human being and culture is a unique collection of living forces, it has a distinct point of equilibrium or perfection. Crucially, he claims that this point of perfection is “its physical *truth, goodness, and necessity*.”⁶⁵ He illustrates this by describing the various ideals pursued by ancient nations – political morality by the Chinese, patriotism by the Romans, aesthetic perfection by the Greeks.⁶⁶

Herder’s conception of *Völker* as psychological communities which pursue distinct ideals was formative for eighteenth-century German social thought and, I propose, also had a great impact on Du Bois during his Berlin years. In “The Conservation of Races,” Du Bois famously defined a race as “a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily *striving* together after more or less vividly conceived ideals of life.”⁶⁷

Spawning the sub-field now called philosophy of race, Kwame Anthony Appiah famously interpreted Du Bois’ definition above as involving an untenable biological realism about race. In response, numerous scholars have argued that Du Bois presents here, in whole or in part, a social constructivist account.⁶⁸ Within this group, Chike Jeffers has more recently drawn a distinction between political and cultural forms of social constructivism. He argues that Du Bois conceives of races as

⁶² Forster 2018, 77.

⁶³ Herder 2002, 291; 1991b, 32–33; cf. *Ideas*, 436–442.

⁶⁴ Herder 2002, 361.

⁶⁵ *Ideas*, 436, emphasis added.

⁶⁶ *Ideas*, 438.

⁶⁷ Du Bois 2015a, 53, emphasis added.

⁶⁸ Foundational in this debate are Appiah 1985, 21–37; Outlaw 1996, 15–38; and Gooding-Williams 1996, 47–64; Taylor 2000, 103–128.

rich historical-cultural communities, and not merely as groups unified by external political positionality.⁶⁹

Despite this intense philosophical interest, it has not yet been noticed that Du Bois may have partly drawn his conception of race from the definition of a *Volk* offered by his mentor Gustav von Schmoller just two years prior in Berlin. At the outset of his as yet untranslated text on *National Economy, National Economy Theory, and its Methods* – published in 1893, the same year during which Du Bois took seminars with him on “Theoretical National Economy” and “Practical National Economy” – Schmoller gives the following definition of a people:

A nation (*Volk*) is a multitude of people united by language and stock (*Abstammung*), customs and morality, *usually* (*meist*) also through law and church, history and constitution, which is bound together by ties thousands and millions of times closer than with the members of other nations.⁷⁰

The parallels with Du Bois' definition of race are striking: both define groups in terms which include reference to biological ('blood' or *Abstammung*) and cultural elements (language, history, traditions or customs, and ideals or morality); both emphasize a tight psychological community; and, crucially, both definitions pivot on a distinction between essential and accidental attributes (marked by “usually” or *meist*).

The last of these is most interesting as Du Bois appears to *invert* many of Schmoller's essential and accidental attributes: he demotes blood and language to accidental and makes common history essential. If this historical claim is correct, then by “Conservation,” the early Du Bois appears to have been pulling the concept of *Volk* he absorbed in Berlin away from the vestiges of racial biologism. If this is true, then it provides historical support for Jeffers' argument that Du Bois' early theory of race was an attempt to provide a principally cultural conception even if it had not fully shed reference to biology.

More relevant to present purposes is the claim that the elements Du Bois preserved from the German concept of *Volk* descend, at least in part, from Herder. After all, Schmoller, and the German Historical School of Economics more generally, owed their concept of *Volk* to Herder and the German Historicist tradition.⁷¹ Thus, Du Bois' approach to human cultures echoes Herder's: both take cultures to be unified by the attempt to realize distinct shared ideals and to express this striving in their activities, artifacts, and institutions. Indeed, by downplaying the significance of biological aspects of race in favor of historical and social factors, Du Bois

⁶⁹ Jeffers 2013, 403–426.

⁷⁰ Schmoller 1893, 10–11, translation mine, emphasis added.

⁷¹ Faithful 2014, 104; Beiser 2011, 12–13; Schäfer 2001, 934.

returned the German *Volk* concept closer to Herder's original conception, in which racial biology was contested, absent, or at most ancillary.⁷²

Though Herder and Du Bois evidently conceived of cultures as internally unified by shared values, there is a persistent ambiguity in their characterizations of the diversity of values *between* cultures. In his mid-career work, *This too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity* (1774), Herder writes that “No human being, no country, no history of a people, no state is like another, and consequently the true, the beautiful, and the good is not alike in them either” and that since “the image of happiness *changes* with each condition and region [...] any *comparison* proves to be problematic.”⁷³ Even in the more subdued *Ideas*, as we have seen, he writes of the incommensurability of each culture's form of perfection.⁷⁴

Passages like these have led many interpreters to view Herder as a cultural relativist.⁷⁵ However, it is clear that he considered cultural diversity to rest on a common, unconscious attempt to realize the universal ideal of *Humanität*: “In every condition and in every society, man could have nothing else in mind, could cultivate nothing else but humanity – however he conceived of it.”⁷⁶ *Humanität*, he tells us, consists in our species capacities of reason and equity, and these are the implicit normative aim of the various manifest values of cultures.⁷⁷ Yet Herder's conception of the relation between the diversity of cultural values and the shared goal of humanity remains ambiguous.

A similar ambiguity permeates the early Du Bois' conception of culture. He writes that all “race groups are striving, each in its own way, to develop for civilization *its particular message, its particular ideal*” and elsewhere he speaks of distinct “race ideal[s].”⁷⁸ Yet, in other cases he presents these ideals in terms which seem to dissolve cultural diversity: “Races and Nations represent organized Human effort, striving each in its own way, each in its own time to realize for mankind *the Good, the Beautiful and the True*,” and “the same ideals which Europe today clearly recognizes were more or less dimly seen in Egypt, Persia and Judea.”⁷⁹ In these contexts, the ideals pursued by specific races and cultures appear distinguishable not by their normative content but by the contingent manner in which groups attempted to realize them.

72 For a careful treatment of Herder on race, and a summary of the debate regarding it, see Sikka 2011, 126–159.

73 Herder 2002, 296; 1991b, 38; quoted and translated in Forster 2018, 77.

74 *Ideas*, 437, emphasis added.

75 Exemplary is Berlin 1976, 143–216.

76 *Ideas*, 426.

77 *Ideas*, 436–442.

78 Du Bois 2015a, 55, 53, emphasis added.

79 Du Bois 2015c, 153–154.

This ambiguity in Herder and Du Bois' characterizations of the diversity of cultural values can be explained at least in part by the tension generated by their attempt to apply their dual-sensed *Bildung* ideal to cultures. We must now return, therefore, to B1 and B2.

5.3 Cultural Bildung

Bildung 1, recall, represents *the cultivation of human capacities in view of an end that is considered a normative ideal*. *Bildung* in this sense is acquired rather than natural, a matter of degree, and considered a universal standard of judgement. Applied to individuals, B1 denotes the view that there is a determinate end to the development of a human being. When applied to cultures, B1 designates the claim that there is a particular process and normative end of the development of all cultures against which one can determine whether and how much they are 'civilized.' As mentioned above, this concept of a universal path of social progress – from savage, through barbaric, to civilized – I will refer to as *cultural evolutionism*.⁸⁰ To be clear, the assertion of cultural evolutionism is not just that cultures ought to progress or evolve in general, but that there is a definitive end to the sequence of all cultural development, a universal standard of civilization.

The popularization of cultural evolutionism is one aspect of Herder's legacy that cannot be wished away. For instance, in the *Ideas*, as we have seen, he writes that "there are nations in the infancy, youth, manhood, and senility of the species."⁸¹ Ignoring his own ostensible commitment to the incommensurability of cultures, the concept of *Bildung*, its cognates, and its antonyms often carry Herder's normative judgement of cultures. The *Ideas* is full of references to *gebildete* (developed), *ausgebildete* (refined), and *wohlgebildete* (well-developed) cultures who are contrasted with *ungebildete* (undeveloped), *wilde* (wild or savage), *rohe* (rude), and *tierische* (animal-like) ones.⁸² "In whole nations" he writes, "reason lies trapped beneath layers of brutishness (*Tierheit*)."⁸³ Calling certain cultures animal-like, in a context in which humanity is the highest ideal, is a devastating assessment. Thus, though he often explicitly recommends ethical neutrality, he also ranks cultures in view of universal ethical ideals.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Stocking Jr. 1982, 75, 113.

⁸¹ *Ideas*, 237; cf. Beiser 1992, 208.

⁸² See especially *Ideas*, 23–24; 40; 102; 141–142; 146–147; 253.

⁸³ *Ideas*, 121.

⁸⁴ *Ideas*, 213; Sikka 2011, 15–25.

Many liberal interpreters contest this characterization of Herder on the grounds that (i) against dominant ‘state of nature’ discourses he emphasized that all cultures have *Bildung*, (ii) he criticized standard Enlightenment philosophies of history for presenting European modernity as the universal end of human development, (iii) he emphasized the importance of taking the perspective of other cultures, and (iv) he stressed the difficulty of trans-cultural ethical assessment given the diversity of values between cultures.⁸⁵ All of these interpretive claims are true, but they are all nonetheless compatible with his affirmation of a universal normative standard (B1) that is met by various cultures in various degrees.⁸⁶ He is completely unambiguous on this point: “the difference between enlightened and unenlightened, cultivated and uncultivated peoples is thus not one of kind but of degree.”⁸⁷ Further, he claims that European modernity is not the end of *Bildung* while taking for granted that modern European cultures are closer to it than indigenous American or African ones.⁸⁸

The early Du Bois likewise preserved the concept of a hierarchical gradation of cultures. He writes, for instance, of “civilized” and “underdeveloped races” and of their place on a “scale of civilization.”⁸⁹ This conception is evident too in his comments on Africa as a place of “savage ancestors” wandering in darkness.⁹⁰ Moreover, it is clear that Du Bois conceives of this ‘scale of civilization’ as temporally extended, as he suggests that African American culture is “backward” and “struggling in the eddies of the fifteenth century.”⁹¹ Accordingly, his protests against racism do not assume that the Negro presently *possess* a culture which deserves recognition, but rather that they have the *potential* to develop such a culture.⁹² For the early Du Bois it is all too clear that there is a determinate scale of cultural development – one according to which his people, taken as a whole, do not yet measure favorably.⁹³

⁸⁵ Berlin 1976, 206–12; Barnard 1965, 148–50; Spencer 2012, 118–123. For an overview of this debate see Spencer 1998, 53–70.

⁸⁶ Moore 2024, liii.

⁸⁷ *Ideas*, 227.

⁸⁸ *Ideas*, 143–163.

⁸⁹ Du Bois 2015b, 112; 2015d, 220.

⁹⁰ *Study*, 88.

⁹¹ *Souls*, 44, 45, 47, 96.

⁹² *Study*, 90.

⁹³ The concept of *civilization* encompasses matters as diverse as political ideals, practical and technological advances, ethical and social norms, and even aesthetic values. In contemporary thought we often separate these various types of normative commitments, endorsing the universality of some and particularizing others. This option was not available to Herder and Du Bois. For them, all features are subsumed under the universal, normative concept of *Bildung* and its English cognates development, culture, and civilization.

It is remarkable that, despite their shared cultural evolutionism, Du Bois also followed Herder in applying the pluralism of B2 to cultures. Applied to individuals, B2 advocates for the autonomous development of the unique capacities of a self. Applied to cultures, it denotes the claim that each culture holds, at least *in potentia*, something of distinctive worth for the rest of humanity. In this case, it entails *cultural pluralism*: the view, in the simplest of terms, that all cultures have something of value deserving cultivation and protection. Set against his cultural evolutionism, the expression and popularization of this view marks a high point in Herder's influence.⁹⁴

Just as he did in the case of human individuals, Herder suffuses the fact of cultural particularity with normative significance. As he puts it, "each nation has its riches and distinctive features of spirit, of character, as of country. These must be sought out and cultivated."⁹⁵ If such an idea now strikes us as intuitive, it is a testament to the enormity of Herder's influence.

In terms of political theory, this cultural pluralism simultaneously justifies cultural nationalism and cosmopolitanism. In one breath one can assert 'my culture has something of value' and 'so too does every other.'⁹⁶ Herder takes such cultural diversity as valuable on the grounds that each distinctive culture has the potential to realize epistemic, ethical, and aesthetic values that are universally beneficial.⁹⁷ This view he influentially expressed in terms of cultural 'gifts' and 'genius.' The most decisive formulation of this is the following:

[N]ature developed the form of the *human type* as manifoldly as her workshop required and allowed [...]. *The negro, the [native] American, the Mongol has gifts, talents, performed dispositions that the European does not have.*⁹⁸

Unbeknownst to him and many Herder scholars to this day, multiple generations of those self-same "negro[es]" would adopt this idea as a theoretical basis for Black cultural nationalism – using it to articulate what Chike Jeffers has dubbed *the Black Gift Thesis*.⁹⁹

Herder's vision of cultural "gifts" and "genius" took on new life at the core of Black nationalism at the dawn of the twentieth century. Transmitted through

⁹⁴ Dilthey (1927, 268) notes this.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Forster 2018, 270; cf. *Ideas*, 3.

⁹⁶ Herder voiced this view in the context of his program of revitalizing German cultural nationalism, and it was developed by many thinkers who sought to articulate the distinctive value of their cultures (see Broce 1986, 151–152; Arnold, Kloocke, and Menze 2009, 411–414).

⁹⁷ *Ideas*, 437–438.

⁹⁸ Herder 2002, 395, emphasis added; 1991c, 699.

⁹⁹ Jeffers 2016, 79–97.

Blyden and Cooper, it developed into Du Bois' conception of cultural diversity. Thus, Du Bois opens *Souls* with the statement that "Negro blood has a *message* for the world [...]. This, then, is the end of [Negro] striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his *latent genius*."¹⁰⁰ According to Du Bois, such messages represent a culture's unique capacities and ideals which will contribute to the further development of humanity.¹⁰¹ "The Negro people, as a race", he declares, "have a contribution to make to civilization and humanity, which no other race can make."¹⁰² Thus, while B1 drives Du Bois to the assumption of an universal end of human development according to which Negroes are culturally "backward," B2 allows him to express that Negro culture holds within it a distinctive gift of universal value. In this sense, his conception of culture recapitulates the tension between the two senses of Herder's without resolving it.

5.4 Conflict Between Bildung 1 and Bildung 2

It is time that we attend carefully to the tension between the two senses of *Bildung*. In the case of individuals, B1 and B2 can readily complement one another given the right background commitments. The claim that there is a universal end to the cultivation of individuals (B1) is not at odds with the claim that they ought to self-realize (B2), so long as (a) that end is specified in terms capacious enough to accommodate individual diversity, and (b) one does not endorse a strong, subjectivist conception of ethics. Herder and Du Bois both meet the former criterion insofar as they emphasize the distinctness of the individual which emerges through the process of cultivation. They also meet the latter criterion insofar as neither expresses commitment to the radical position that *only* unique standards apply to each individual. Therefore, their application of B1 and B2 to individuals is unproblematic.

This compatibility comes under much greater pressure in the domain of culture. Here, B1 presents a unilinear process towards a universal normative standard, while B2 affirms the radically different and potentially incompatible values of particular cultures. Whereas the former entails *value universalism*, that is, commitment to normative standards that apply across all cultures and historical epochs, the latter entails *value pluralism*, that is, commitment to normative standards that are incommensurable.

¹⁰⁰ *Souls*, 3, emphasis added.

¹⁰¹ Du Bois 2015d, 218; cf. *Souls*, 11; 2015a, 55.

¹⁰² Du Bois 2015a, 61.

Value universalism and pluralism are not necessarily incompatible. One can be a universalist about a restricted set of values and committed to the importance of diversity across other value domains (the paradigmatic liberal values of autonomy and diversity exemplify this, for example). Further, value pluralism can be compatible with universalism so long as that pluralism does not become a strong form of *relativism*, which rejects the legitimacy of *any* universal norms. Thus, the two are compatible if: (a) one holds universal standards of cultural development in terms which can accommodate a wide diversity of local values, and (b) one does not endorse a cultural relativism strong enough to undermine the legitimacy of all universal values. The question of whether there is a genuine conflict in these senses of *Bildung*, then, is the question of whether Herder and Du Bois meet these criteria.

To start, neither are value relativists in the strong sense insofar as each clearly remains committed to a set of values which can be applied as a standard of judgment across cultural and historical contexts. As we have seen, despite Herder's allusions to the incommensurability of each nation's standard of perfection, conception of happiness, and ideals, he explicitly endorses a universal normative criterion, namely humanity (*Humanität*). On Herder's account, humanity is our species-character of reason and equity, and the perfection of these is the goal of our *Bildung*.¹⁰³ Since this standard is naturalistically conceived as inherent to our human constitution, it applies to all instances of human life and society – it is a normative universal. Insofar as he endorses to this standard, Herder is not a strong cultural relativist.

Du Bois' value universalism is not hard to discern either. It is evident when he speaks of the cardinal normative concepts in the singular, of "*the Good, the Beautiful and the True*."¹⁰⁴ It is also clear in a talk entitled the "The Spirit of Modern Europe" (1900), where he outlines the ethical ideals realized in various European nations as the guiding standards for all of humankind. He urges his African American listeners to inculcate these norms in their race and criticizes the American nation as deficient in light of them.¹⁰⁵ Thus, Herder and Du Bois meet criterion (b).

Both, however, fail to meet criterion (a). That is, they hold a conception of the universal end of human collective development (B1) in terms which are *averse* to deep value diversity. This is so because they embrace, I argue, a conception of the end of human cultivation overdetermined by the image of Europe. In analytic terms, *Bildung*, culture, or civilization is a predicate attributable in degree to a wide variety of particulars. Yet, this predicate is *overdetermined* insofar as the paradigmatic instance which determines the degree of each is insufficiently abstract: its

¹⁰³ *Ideas*, 425–429; cf. Spencer 2012, 112–118.

¹⁰⁴ Du Bois 2015c, 153–154.

¹⁰⁵ Du Bois 2015c, 139–166.

essential features have not been sufficiently distinguished from the accidental. For Herder and Du Bois, the paradigm of human culture is to be found in Europe. Their error, in my view, is *not* that they take European collective life as exemplary, but that they use it as an archetype without adequately clarifying which of its features are appropriate as a model for other cultures.¹⁰⁶

At first blush, however, Herder seems to avoid this mistake. As we have seen, his appeal to the universal norm of *humanity* is meant to accommodate a wide range of differences between human cultures.¹⁰⁷ Further, he was critical of Enlightenment philosophers of history who presented eighteenth-century Europe as the culmination of human development. Nevertheless, he simultaneously saw European culture as most fully realizing the ideal of humanity. Looking backward, he claims that the cultures of Greece, “from the least beginnings of civilization (*Bildung*), passed through each stage more completely than any other people in history.”¹⁰⁸ Similarly, he claims that Greece is the source of European culture, writing that “from the regions of finely formed (*schönegebildeter*) peoples we have derived our religion, our arts, our sciences; indeed the whole fabric of our culture and humanity (*Kultur und Humanität*).”¹⁰⁹ Though he does not endorse a *linear* progressive view of history, he does indeed endorse an *oscillatory* progressive conception of it.¹¹⁰ While Herder rejects emphatically that Europe has reached a higher stage of human culture than Greece, his view of history suggests that a higher stage of human development will eventually arise in Europe. He claims at the close of the *Ideas* that Europe is destined to develop “a reason and humanity (*Humanität*) that in time [will] embrace the globe.”¹¹¹

Herder’s conception of *Bildung* is overdetermined in the sense that it insufficiently abstracts the essential from the accidental features of European culture, and this move is averse to the local value diversity of other cultures. There are laughable instances of this, like Herder’s association of “beardedness” with being civilized.¹¹² But there are far more insidious forms, too. For example, while he celebrates freedom as central to humanity, he also regards the practices of indigenous Americans as manifesting a “savagely proud love of liberty (*barbarischstolzen*

106 I take this to be a reconstruction of the logical content of at least one form of Eurocentrism.

107 *Ideas*, 426.

108 *Ideas*, 381.

109 *Ideas*, 147.

110 *Ideas*, 421–422; 441.

111 *Ideas*, 606. To be fair, he draws back this optimism following the failure of the French Revolution in the Tenth Collection of the *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity* (1797).

112 *Ideas*, 142.

Freiheit).¹¹³ This depreciative note, on what on its face appears as a manifestation of the striving for freedom characteristic of humanity, suggests the presence of an additional, suppressed criterion of judgement. Herder seems to assume that a particular socio-political constitution is the emblematic realization of human freedom (likely a republican state) and, hence, implicitly uses this ideal as a standard to judge other cultures. Further, while the end of humanity is constituted by the perfection of reason, his stipulation that the Negro is endowed with a “thoughtless disposition” provides all but the conclusion of an argument for their inferiority.¹¹⁴

Du Bois' concept of human culture shares in this mistake. In the aforementioned speech on “The Spirit of Modern Europe” he states explicitly that “the organization of European states and their development for the last four centuries has been *the pattern and norm of the civilization of the world*.”¹¹⁵ Europe is said to have best realized the universal standards of human organization: justice, freedom, knowledge, and authority.¹¹⁶ He explicitly presents other human civilizations as deficient attempts to realize those same ideals, stating that “the same ideals which Europe today clearly recognizes were more or less dimly seen in Egypt, Persia and Judea.”¹¹⁷ Though he wants to leave room for each race to actualize its distinctive race ideals, their “own peculiar civilization,” it is also clear that the image of modern Europe stands as his paradigm of human culture.¹¹⁸

Herder and Du Bois' conception of a universal end of human development (B1) overdetermined by Eurocentrism clearly conflicts with their claim that each culture has its own distinctive values (B2). In other words, unbeknownst to them, their *value pluralism* comes up against the hard limit of their own *value universalism*. My claim is not that this conflict between B1 and B2 is insoluble for us, but only that it presents a persistent tension immanent in the theoretical frameworks of Herder and the early Du Bois. Perceiving this pressure provides us a new entry point to the conflicts which animate Du Bois' landmark attempt to conceptualize and solve the turn-of-the-century ‘Negro Problem.’

113 *Ideas*, 157.

114 *Ideas*, 154.

115 Du Bois 2015c, 141, emphasis added.

116 Du Bois 2015c, 153.

117 Du Bois 2015c, 153–154.

118 Du Bois 2015c, 153.

6 The ‘Negro Problem’ as a Bildung Problem

It is curious that the early Du Bois is both berated as a Eurocentric elitist and celebrated as the vanguard of twentieth-century Black cultural nationalism.¹¹⁹ On the one hand, his infamous uplift program of the ‘Talented Tenth’ calls for a cadre of exceptional men, who “have reached the full measure of the best type of *modern European culture*,” to uplift the ‘backward’ Black masses.¹²⁰ On the other hand, the closing chapter of *Souls* discerns a salvatory message to humanity implicit in the folk-culture of African Americans, and “Conservation” bids for the development of their distinct race ideals as a gift to human civilization. The foregoing gives us reason to think of these diverse elements as tied together in Du Bois’ conceptual framework itself. That is, to explain this contradiction in his approach to the ‘Negro Problem’ we need to look no further than his conception of culture, development, and civilization – in other words, his *Bildung* – itself.

Du Bois’ essay “The Study of Negro Problems” (1897) provides us with the clearest statement of his early theoretical account of the state of African Americans at the end of the nineteenth century. *Bildung* 1 and 2 are evident, I argue, in his definition of a social problem as “the failure of an organized social group to realize its group ideals, through the inability to adapt a certain desired line of action to given conditions of life.”¹²¹ Here he expressly defines a social problem as the failure of a culture to realize B2, that is, to develop and express its “its group ideals,” and, thus, as the failure to contribute to human civilization.

Further, by explaining this failure as “the inability to adapt a certain desired line of action to given conditions of life,” Du Bois also draws B1 into his conception of a social problem. This is because, in this context, the “given conditions” to which Negroes fail to adapt is “the level of American civilization.”¹²² Their lack of cultural development is assumed to be a primary cause of their social problem. As he puts it a few pages later, “Negroes do not share the full national life *because* as a mass they have not reached a sufficiently high grade of culture.”¹²³ Thus, Du Bois’ early conception of a social problem is infused with both strains of the Herderian ideal of *Bildung*. On his account, a social problem is constituted by the failure of a group to realize their distinct ideals (B2), and this is caused by a lack of adjustment to civilization (B1).

But Du Bois adds an element to his explanation of the ‘Negro Problem’ that distinguishes it from social problems in general, namely, the prejudice of White Amer-

¹¹⁹ Moses 1978, 132–148; James 1997, 15–34.

¹²⁰ Du Bois 2015d, 214, emphasis added.

¹²¹ *Study*, 78.

¹²² *Souls*, 89.

¹²³ *Study*, 82, emphasis added; cf. Du Bois 2015b, 112.

icans. This “conviction varying in intensity, but always widespread—that people of Negro blood should not be admitted into the group life of the nation no matter what their condition might be,” Du Bois writes, “gives rise to economic problems, to educational problems, and nice questions of social morality.”¹²⁴ Thus, he qualifies his assessment of the breakdown of collective Negro *Bildung* by adding that it is at least partially caused by the hostility of the surrounding American world.

Du Bois' account of the effects of this prejudice reveal that his conception of the ‘Negro Problem’ also involves the ideal of *Bildung* applied to the level of individuals. The result of prejudice he most bemoans is its frustration of the development of Negro individuals:

[Prejudice] makes it more difficult for black men to earn a living or spend their earnings as they will; it gives them poorer school facilities and restricted contact with cultured classes; and it becomes, throughout the land, a cause and an excuse for discontent, lawlessness, laziness and injustice.¹²⁵

As a consequence of the sociality of the self, we have seen, the *Bildung* of individuals always depends on the existence of the right type of social-cultural context. Du Bois' primary critique of America, then, is that by “[looking] on in amused contempt and pity,” by excluding them from economic opportunities, education, and civic rights, America has asphyxiated the capacity of Negroes to cultivate themselves both individually and collectively.¹²⁶

Just as the absence and impediment of *Bildung* constitutes the ‘Negro Problem,’ Du Bois sees its restoration as the solution. His emphasis on education as the cure for America's social ills is consistent with his deeper conception of human cultivation. Thus, he defines education in the broadest of terms as the medium of social development, claiming that “education is that *whole system of human training* within and without school house walls, *which molds and develops men*.”¹²⁷ For Du Bois, then, developing a small class of cultivated leaders principally through education – an “aristocracy of talent and character” – is the way to lead the rest of the race upward.¹²⁸ This developmental approach, central to the infamous ‘Talented Tenth’ strategy, is his answer to the ‘Negro Problem.’

Naturally, the tension between B1 and B2 in Du Bois' conception of *Bildung* haunt this solution. On the one hand, the ‘Talented Tenth’ program assumes that

¹²⁴ *Study*, 82–3.

¹²⁵ *Study*, 83.

¹²⁶ *Souls*, 3–4.

¹²⁷ Du Bois 2015d, 220–221, emphasis added.

¹²⁸ Du Bois 2015d, 214, 221; cf. *Souls*, 46–52.

there is a determinate civilization or culture that can be assimilated by these prospective race leaders. This ideal culture, of course, is reflected in the best of European society. These leaders, recall, “have reached the full measure of the best type of *modern European culture*.”¹²⁹ And they must be trained, like him, in the best “colleges and universities of the land.”¹³⁰ On the other hand, Du Bois considers it the mission of the ‘Tenth’ to help their race realize their distinctive “race ideals,” and he notes that “each soul and race-soul needs its own peculiar curriculum.”¹³¹

The co-presence of these two ideals of *Bildung* poses questions that are difficult to solve at both a practical and theoretical level. Are the Negro ideals to come from Europe (not Negro), Africa (too savage), or the African American masses (backward)? How does an uncultured group begin to develop its unique message if they must be trained by external resources and in the mold of another culture? How can such leaders mediate between these two spiritual communities without dissociative disorder? These tensions stand at the core of Du Bois’ solution to the ‘Negro Problem,’ and its burden bears on both prospective race leaders in the form of double-consciousness and on us who follow in his wake.¹³²

7 Conclusion

While it has often been noticed that Du Bois’ conception of race is reminiscent of Herder’s *Volk* conception, this article confirms this connection by presenting the first detailed historical account of how this transmission may have taken place. In the process, I have uncovered a rich connection between Du Bois and Herder’s deeper conception of human development at both a descriptive and normative level, and as applied to both individuals and cultures.

As regards the descriptive level, I have shown that Du Bois’ intellectual formation was marked by a range of thinkers who were but one step removed from the father of German Historicism. He was enlivened by Herder’s thesis, which he encountered primarily through Africana thinkers Edward Blyden and Anna Julia Cooper, that each culture has a distinct “gift” for humanity. Through his literary fascination with Goethe and his Anglophone heir Carlyle, he came to view life as

¹²⁹ Du Bois 2015d, 214, emphasis added.

¹³⁰ Du Bois 2015d, 214.

¹³¹ Du Bois 2015d, 214.

¹³² See Robert Gooding-Williams (2009, 130–162) for a fascinating discussion of the self-referential and practical paradoxes of Du Bois’ political theory.

a quest for individual self-realization. In Berlin, he encountered Herder's ideas in the courses of Treitschke and Dilthey, and he may have reworked Schmoller's Herderian conception of a *Volk* in his famous early definition of a race.

As regards the normative level, I have argued that Herder and Du Bois' conception *Bildung* is beset by an internal contradiction between *cultural evolutionism* and *cultural pluralism*. This tension is produced by the fact that both conceived of the end of universal human development in terms overdetermined by Eurocentrism.

If *Souls*, in the words of Du Bois' foremost biographer, "redefined the terms of a three-hundred-year interaction between black and white people and influenced the cultural and political psychology of peoples of African descent," then the foregoing account provides reason to think that the "new terms" introduced by Du Bois inherited the strains of a conception of culture, development, and civilization traceable to Herder.¹³³ If what I have argued is correct, then Du Bois' landmark approach to the 'Negro Problem' brought the tensions of Herder's *Bildung* conception into the very heart of twentieth-century Africana thought.

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