WAS FICHTE AN ETHNIC NATIONALIST? ON CULTURAL NATIONALISM AND ITS DOUBLE[1]

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Abstract: Even though Fichte's *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (*Addresses to the German Nation*) arguably constitutes one of the founding texts of nationalist political thought, it has received little scholarly attention from English-speaking political theorists. The French, by contrast, have a long tradition of treating Fichte as a central figure in the history of political thought, and have given considerable attention to the *Reden* in particular. While the dominant French interpretation, which construes the *Reden* as a non-ethnic cultural nationalist text, provides a welcome corrective to those who impute unmediated ethnic nationalism to Fichte, it is ultimately flawed for missing the text's crypto-ethnic character. While Fichte officially defines nationality in terms of language and culture, his linguistic–cultural nationalism ultimately collapses into ethnic nationalism. This collapse, signalled by his appeals to *Abstammung* and *Abkunft*, is propelled by the fact that, ultimately, the appeal to language and culture is incapable of securing immortality, which is the supposed source of its motivational power for Fichte.

If only a handful of texts can rightly claim to rank amongst the foundational texts of nationalist political thought, Johann Gottlieb Fichte's *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (*Addresses to the German Nation*) is surely one of them. Yet, despite a growing interest amongst Anglophone scholars in Fichte's philosophy in its own right — and not just as a historical bridge between Kant and Hegel — and despite contemporary Anglophone political theorists' resurgent interest in nationalism, scholarly work in English on the nature of Fichte's nationalism, and on the *Reden* in particular, barely exists.[3] One reason for this paucity is easy to discern: the chauvinistic character of the *Reden*'s nationalism,

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[3] A recent exception is the analysis of the *Reden* in the excellent article by David Martyn, 'Borrowed Fatherland: Nationalism and Language Purism in Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation*', *The Germanic Review*, 72 (4) (1997), pp. 303–15. Older works in English that discuss Fichte's nationalist thought include: H.C. Engelbrecht, *Johann Gottlieb Fichte: A Study of his Political Writings with Special Reference to his Nationalism* (New York, 1933); Hans Kohn, 'The Paradox of Fichte's Nationalism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 10 (3) (1949), pp. 319–43; Hans Kohn, *Prelude to Nation-States: The French and German Experience, 1789–1815* (Princeton, NJ, 1967); and Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* (Oxford, 4th edn., 1993 (1960)). For an example of the recent scholarly interest in English of Fichte's philosophy in general, see Frederick Neuhouser, *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge, 1990); for a work that covers his political philosophy, see Allen Wood, 'Fichte's Philosophy of Right and Ethics', *The Cambridge Companion to Fichte*, ed. Günter Zöller (Cambridge, forthcoming); neither work covers his nationalism in any depth.

combined with the history of the text's subsequent reception in Germany which marked it as an icon of German nationalism, has rather too closely tied the *Reden* to the darkest hours of the twentieth century. When Anglophone scholars of Fichte do take his practical philosophy seriously, they tend to focus on his earlier works, written before the 'nationalist turn' taken under French occupation; and when the *Reden* is read at all, either it is read in light of Fichte's earlier anti-Semitic outbursts, his patriarchalism and the *Reden*'s notorious legacy, or, for those who wish to take Fichte's philosophy seriously, it is read in light of the fact that Fichte's nationalism is little to be seen in his earlier — or, indeed, his later — works, thus inviting the easy dismissal of the text as inconsistent with these other, more 'serious' ethical and political writings, to which proper philosophical attention must be paid. In either case, what is tacitly taken for granted by many Anglophone scholars is that the ethnic character of the *Reden*'s nationalism is so obvious (and perhaps so obviously proto-racist) that the text's only interest is as a historical footnote to one of human history's most shameful chapters.

The state of affairs in France could not be more different. In sharp contrast to his treatment in the English-language scholarly literature, in France Fichte is commonly treated as a central figure in the history of modern political philosophy,[4] a status that has spawned an extensive discussion of the character of his nationalism. Rather than dismissing the *Reden* as an ethnic nationalist text incompatible with Fichte's more 'serious' philosophical writings, the dominant view that has emerged in France — represented by Fichte scholars such as Xavier Léon, Martial Gueroult, Alain Renaut, Luc Ferry and Etienne Balibar — is that the *Reden*'s nationalism is decisively *not* of the ethnic variety. This is the thesis that I propose to examine here: that the *Reden* champions cultural but not ethnic nationalism.[5]

Several considerations lend particular interest to such an examination. First, by interrogating the character of one of nationalism's foundational texts, the present analysis fills a considerable gap in the English-language scholarly literature on the history of nationalist political thought. Second, the dominant French thesis is especially interesting and provocative because it suggests that the *Reden*'s notorious legacy, as an icon of German nationalism, does a great injustice to the character of Fichte's political thought. In particular, the French scholarship forces us to complicate considerably our reading of the *Reden*'s nationalism — we can no longer simply take for granted the text's unmediated ethnic character. My exegetical thesis here is twofold. The non-ethnic, cultural nationalist reading of the *Reden* in France provides a welcome corrective to

[4] See, for example, Luc Ferry's three-volume *Philosophie politique* (Paris, 1984–5) (the final volume of which is co-authored with Alain Renaut).

[5] On the distinction between cultural and ethnic nationalism see, for example, Kai Nielsen, 'Cultural Nationalism, Neither Ethnic nor Civic', *The Philosophical Forum*, 28 (1–2) (1996–7), pp. 42–52.

caricatured readings that have, for too long, justified the scholarly neglect in English of one of the key texts of nationalist political thought. This is not to say, however, that the *Reden*'s nationalism is devoid of ethnicism; to the contrary, my suggestion is that while officially the *Reden* indeed constitutes a cultural nationalist text, its ultimately ethnic character emerges in subtle ways that greatly illuminate the discursive character of cultural nationalist ideology. One ought to distinguish here between two kinds of ethnic nationalism: *unmediated ethnic nationalism*, which champions a nation defined in the first instance directly in genealogical terms; and *mediated* or *crypto-ethnic nationalism*, which initially conceives of the nation in other terms, but whose nationalist politics in the final instance draws upon an ethnic supplement. The French scholarship helps us to see that the *Reden* never advanced the unmediated ethnic nationalism that eventually captured the German imagination; but contrary to the dominant French view, I will demonstrate that the *Reden* nonetheless remains an ethnic nationalist text — of the second, mediated variety.

This points to a third consideration, which gives the present analysis an interest in addition to the purely exegetical one. Many contemporary social and political theorists have argued that the nation is indispensable to solving the 'motivation problem' in modern liberal democracy — i.e. that the nation is necessary for mobilizing democratic projects and effecting social integration.[6] Alain Renaut has accordingly suggested that, properly understood, the *Reden* articulates precisely the sort of political theory that liberal democracies must learn from today: in particular, he argues that, by championing a cultural nationalism that potentially avoids the pathologies of its ethnic kin, the *Reden* opens up an intellectual space for precisely the sort of nationalism that contemporary political theorists sympathetic to the nation have been seeking.[7] My reading of the *Reden* suggests that, to the contrary, the crypto-ethnic logic of Fichte's argument raises some important doubts about that potential.

I
The French Debate about Fichte's *Reden*

The non-ethnic reading of the *Reden* is perhaps best understood against the background of a longstanding debate in the French secondary literature on Fichte. Not surprisingly, the key issue through the lens of which Fichte's French commentators (though not solely his French commentators) have read him has been his relationship to the values of the French Revolution. The *Reden*

[6] Cf. Brian Barry, 'Self-Government Revisited', *Democracy and Power: Essays in Political Theory I* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 156–86; Dominique Schnapper, *La Communauté des citoyens: Sur l'idée moderne de nation* (Paris, 1994); and David Miller, *On Nationality* (Oxford, 1995).

[7] Alain Renaut, 'Présentation', in Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Discours à la nation allemande*, ed. A. Renaut (Paris, 1992).

appeared eighteen years after the French Revolution: it comprises thirteen addresses that Fichte delivered at the Berlin Academy on Sundays during the winter of 1807 to 1808. Berlin was under French occupation at the time, and the foreign occupiers are the target of Fichte's polemic: his stated goal is to rouse the German nation from its slumber to assert its freedom and throw off the Napoleonic yoke. For French readers of the *Reden*, then, the key exegetical question has been whether by the time of the *Reden* Fichte had abandoned his youthful and staunchly republican defence of the Revolution in favour of Romantic nationalism and even pan-Germanism.[8] Did the *Reden*'s chauvinistic appeal to the German nation as the *only* modern nation with the inherent capacity for freedom, and his polemic against the French as the bearers of a dead language, imply that the French Revolution had soured for Fichte as well? Did it imply, for instance, that Fichte had now concluded that a *French* Revolution could never have been the harbinger of freedom even in principle, regardless of how things actually turned out in the end?

For Charles Andler, the answer to such questions is yes: Fichte, particularly in his *Reden*, provides one of the primary philosophical sources of the chauvinistic pan-Germanism thought to be at the root of German aggression in World War I.[9] But in the eyes of Xavier Léon, Fichte to the contrary never abandoned his allegiance to the French Revolution:

> The *Addresses to the German Nation*, far from marking, as all too often has been believed, a sort of conversion by Fichte to nationalism under the pressure of circumstance, are thus nothing but the continuation — adapted as always to the events of the hour — of the struggle which he never ceased to wage for the reign of liberty and for the triumph of democracy.[10]

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[8] For an overview of these debates in the French secondary literature, see Renaut, 'Présentation', p. 23; Martial Gueroult, 'Fichte et Xavier Léon', in M. Gueroult, *Études sur Fichte* (New York, 1974), pp. 247–84; Blandine Kriegel, 'Droit du peuple et esprit du peuple', *Philosophie politique*, 8 (1997), pp. 95–117. On the character and the historical context of Fichte's defence of the Revolution, and particularly of Fichte's *Beitrag zur Berichtigung der Urteile des Publikums über die französische Revolution* of 1793–4, see Anthony J. La Volpa's important recent intellectual biography of Fichte's early years, *Fichte: The Self and the Calling of Philosophy, 1762–1799* (Cambridge, 2001).

[9] Charles Andler, *Le Pangermanisme philosophique (1800 à 1914)* (Paris, 1917). Of course, it was not just French writers who read Fichte in this way. For example, in *Nationalism and Culture*, the manuscript that Rudolf Rocker published in English translation after having fled from Germany, Rocker asserts that under French occupation Fichte underwent a sudden conversion to nationalism and abandoned his earlier republicanism. Rudolf Rocker, *Nationalism and Culture*, trans. Ray E. Chase (Los Angeles, 1937), p. 189.

[10] Xavier Léon, *Fichte et son temps*, Vol. II, 2 (Paris, 1927), p. 119. All translations from the French are mine.

In a work published in the same year (1927) as Léon's, Victor Basch explicitly claimed that the *Reden* was opposed to everything that pan-Germanism stood for.[11] Similarly, for Martial Gueroult, rather than having abandoned his allegiance to the French Revolution, by 1796 Fichte had simply shifted his justification of it from individualist to collectivist premises.[12] Far from being essential, the *Reden*'s chauvinism was imposed upon Fichte by the force of circumstance, and pan-Germanism was an unforeseen and unwelcome subsequent development.[13] Fichte, for Gueroult as for Léon and Basch, remained an unwavering republican.[14]

My interest here is not in the debate about Fichte's relationship to the Revolution *per se*; rather, it is in the characterization, implicit in that debate, of the *Reden*'s relation to *nationalism*. In this connection it is important to note the implicit analytical opposition common to these French interpretations: invariably, they contrast the 'French Revolution' to the collectivism, hierarchicalism and nationalism associated with the counter-revolution and Romanticism, while they conceive of the Revolution itself as an ally of liberty, equality, rationalism and individualist contractarianism. In other words, the French Revolution as such is not here represented as *itself* having any affinity to nationalism, cultural or otherwise.[15]

Even so sensitive a reader of Fichte as Louis Dumont succumbs to this impulse. Dumont argues that, despite Fichte's continuing loyalty to the French Revolution, his thought is constituted by a hierarchicalism alien to the Revolution. (By hierarchicalism Dumont means what he calls 'l'englobement du contraire', i.e. the elevation of a particular, masquerading as the universal, to stand in for all particulars.) But in a reification of national boundaries worthy of the staunchest of cultural nationalists, he explains this aberration in terms of the fact that, after all, Fichte is a *German*:

> [T]he difference between these two sub-cultures, German and French, is what best accounts for both Fichte's social philosophy and its subsequent destiny. I wish above all to mark the presence, in Fichte the egalitarian, of a

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[11] Victor Basch, *Les Doctrines politiques des philosophes classiques de l'Allemagne: Leibnitz — Kant — Fichte — Hegel* (Paris, 1927), pp. 98–102.

[12] Martial Gueroult, 'Fichte et la Révolution française', in M. Gueroult, *Études sur Fichte* (New York, 1974), pp. 152–246, at pp. 216–19.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 231.

[14] For a sharp critique of what La Volpa sees as the tendency of French commentators such as Léon, Basch and Gueroult to portray the young Fichte as a German Jacobin of sorts, see La Volpa, *Fichte*, pp. 83–4.

[15] Thus, for Léon, Fichte's purported loyalty to the Revolution furnishes proof that his *Reden*, far from being a *source* of German nationalism, remains staunchly *opposed* to 'la conception romantique du Nationalisme allemand', in favour of a democratic nation. Léon, *Fichte et son temps*, Vol. II, 2, p. 78.

form of genuinely hierarchical thought the equivalent of which would be difficult to find in the French revolutionaries.[16]

Germanic thought, for Dumont, is infused with hierarchicalism; the French Revolution (and not, say, *Kant*) stands on the side of universalist individualism; Fichte combines the two.[17] This nationalistic explanation takes on a rather strange quality when one notes that by Fichte's hierarchicalism Dumont has in mind his nationalist chauvinism — the fact that for Fichte the Germans are the particular bearers of a universal world-historical mission on the path of human progress. We are thus asked to believe not only that the French Revolution was primarily individualist in outlook,[18] but also that visions of a national world-historical mission were never entertained by the revolutionaries.[19] Ultimately, it is up to a non-French scholar of Fichte to see that Fichte's nationalism may have actually been linked to his allegiance to the French Revolution.[20]

Against this background, Renaut argues that Fichte must be understood as advancing a conception of the nation that is neither ethnic[21] nor purely contractarian. Renaut attributes the ethnic or genealogical conception of the nation to Romanticism, and agrees with Léon that it is a mistake to understand Fichte as a Romantic. He attributes the purely contractual conception of the nation to the Enlightenment and the ideology of the French Revolution, taking Habermas' constitutional patriotism to be a contemporary variant.[22] Thus

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[16] Louis Dumont, 'Une variante nationale: Le peuple et la nation chez Herder et Fichte', *Essais sur l'individualisme: Une perspective anthropologique sur l'idéologie moderne* (Paris, 1983), pp. 115–31, at p. 122.

[17] *Ibid*., p. 128. I take it that Kant is by far the more important source for Fichte's thought. For the capital importance of Kant to Fichte's intellectual development, see La Volpa's *Fichte*. Léon argues that Fichte not only remained loyal to the French Revolution, but also to his Kantian rationalism. Léon, *Fichte et son temps*, Vol. II, 2, pp. 242–54. Kedourie, *Nationalism*, goes so far as to argue that even Fichte's nationalism finds its roots in Kant's notion of autonomy.

[18] But see Brian C. Singer, 'Cultural versus Contractual Nations: Rethinking their Opposition', *History and Theory*, 35 (3) (1996), pp. 309–37.

[19] But why explain the 'subsequent destiny' of Fichte's thought in terms of its essential hierarchicalism, without similarly explaining the French Revolution's 'subsequent destiny'?

[20] Engelbrecht, *Johann Gottlieb Fichte*, p. 33. I am not offering an 'explanation' in terms of national character here; if there is an explanation, it is that French writers tend subjectively to identify with the French Revolution, as part of their 'own' history, *thanks to* the national imagination.

[21] By an 'ethnic' conception of the nation, I understand a conception that defines the nation genealogically in terms of (a myth of) common descent.

[22] On constitutional patriotism, see Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, ed. Ciaran Cronin and Pablo De Greiff (Cambridge, MA, 1998), Part III; Attracta Ingram, 'Constitutional Patriotism', *Philosophy & Social Criti-*

Renaut reproduces the same analytical opposition we have seen in other French interpreters but, like Dumont, provides an ambivalent answer about Fichte's loyalty to the French Revolution by the time the *Reden* were delivered: not abandoning the Enlightenment values of the Revolution, Fichte is supposed to have provided them with an internal critique.[23]

Concomitantly, his conception of the nation is supposed to be a third way between the (Romantic) genealogical nation and the (Enlightenment) contractual nation: the nation as *educabilité*. Like the genealogical conception, this recognizes the importance of past tradition and culture, especially the nation's rootedness in a historic language. But unlike the genealogical conception, and like the contractual one, it is in principle *open* to anyone, i.e. irrespective of supposedly ascriptive characteristics: Renaut argues that what defines membership for Fichte is adherence to the national spirit and a set of (universal) values.[24] According to Renaut, Fichte understands membership of the nation as a matter of cultural character formation. The nation forges its members; the criterion of membership is not descent, but a historically shared language and culture (*educabilité*, which is a translation of '*Bildung*').

In a sense Renaut is quite right. Fichte officially defines the boundaries of the nation — in uncompromising terms, in fact — as those of a shared culture, above all a shared *language*. The Fourth Address of the *Reden*, for example, defines a people (*Volk*) or nation (*Nation*) — terms that, as best as I can tell, Fichte uses interchangeably — as a group of human beings 'who live together' and who possess a distinct language developed 'in continuous communication with each other'.[25] The Thirteenth Address draws out the nationalist political implications of Fichte's conception of a people *qua* nation in explicitly linguistic–cultural terms: 'the first, original, and truly natural boundaries of states', he says, 'are beyond doubt their internal boundaries' corresponding to the fact of 'speak[ing] the same language'.[26] Not only does Fichte make language the defining criterion, a passage in the Fourth Address

cism, 22 (6) (1996), pp. 1–18; and Patchen Markell, 'Making Affect Safe for Democracy? On "Constitutional Patriotism" ', *Political Theory*, 28 (1) (2000), pp. 38–63.

[23] Renaut, 'Présentation', pp. 26–7; see also Alain Renaut, 'Fichte et la Révolution française', in A. Renaut, *La Révolution française dans la pensée européenne* (Lausanne, 1989), and Alain Renaut, 'Fichte et la politique de l'entendement', *Revue de théologie et de philosophie*, 123 (1991), pp. 305–13.

[24] Renaut, 'Présentation', p. 32.

[25] *Reden*, p. 315 (56). All references to Fichte's *Reden* here will be to Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Reden an die deutsche Nation*, in *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. J.H. Fichte, Vol. 7 (*Zur Politik, Moral, und Philosophie der Geschichte*) (Leipzig, 1845 (1808)), pp. 257–502. Page numbers in parentheses refer to the English translation by R.F. Jones and G.H. Turnbull, *Addresses to the German Nation* (Westport, CT, 1922), though, for the sake of greater literalness and accuracy, I have often modified their translation. References to Renaut's French translation of the text itself (as opposed to his introduction to the text) refer to the German pagination that Renaut's edition also provides.

[26] *Reden*, p. 460 (223).

appears explicitly to dismiss 'purity of descent' as 'insignificant' for determining membership of the German nation;[27] and of course Fichte spends a good deal of the *Reden* outlining a plan for educational reform geared towards forging solid German nationals. Construing the *Reden* as a linguistic–cultural, but not ethnic, nationalist text has ample textual support. I take it that the French scholarship decisively demonstrates that a view of the *Reden* as a champion of unmediated ethnic nationalism is wide of the mark.

But the French 'open nation' interpretation also has a blind-spot, and what it misses is a feature of Fichte's text crucial to my argument. The problem is that when Fichte turns his attention to the question of *motivation* — the question that has led contemporary social and political theorists to argue that modern democracy requires the nation — a different picture emerges: the fact of a shared language and culture proves to be insufficient. The *Reden* starts out as uncompromisingly culturally nationalist, to be sure; but eventually its cultural nationalism subtly collapses into an ethnic one. The task here is to demonstrate and explain this collapse. As we shall see, what propels it is the fact that for Fichte the nation is meant to solve a version of the motivation problem. The *Reden* constitutes a crypto-ethnic nationalist text.

II
Language Child of Nature

According to the *Reden*, unless the state is built upon a national foundation,[28] politics will have no basis other than the instrumentalist pursuit of egoistic interests.[29] It is only the *Vaterlandsliebe* of a living people that can provide the appropriate affective base to mobilize individuals in favour of the common good. Thus the true political motive is love of *Vaterland*, not of the constitution and laws, for it is the nation, not the state, that solves the motivation problem. Ultimately, Fichte's position provides a stark contrast to Jürgen Habermas' *Verfassungspatriotismus*: what motivates sacrifice is

> [n]ot the spirit of calm, citizenly love (*ruhigen bürgerlichen Liebe*) for the constitution and laws, but the devouring flame of higher patriotism (*Vaterlandsliebe*), which embraces the nation as the vesture of the eternal . . . It is not citizenly love for the constitution; that love is quite unable to achieve this, insofar as it remains at [the level of] the understanding (*bei Verstande*).[30]

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[27] *Ibid.*, pp. 313–14 (55).

[28] Fichte officially defines this national foundation in linguistic–cultural terms, but his characterization of love of the nation as *Vaterlandsliebe* — love of the *father*land — already suggests, though it need not imply, an ethnic conception. This ambivalence, of course, is precisely what is at issue in this paper.

[29] Renaut interprets this as a critique of the Enlightenment ('Présentation', pp. 35–6).

[30] *Reden*, p. 384 (141).

What, exactly, is the source of the nation's power to motivate individuals on a non-egoistic basis? The answer Fichte will provide has to do with his belief that the nation is a natural as well as sacred entity that persists over time. Rousseau, seeing in the nation a thoroughly conventional construct, sought to naturalize and sacralize it to lend it *force*. For Fichte, the nation in fact already has a natural basis: language.

Yes, language: for Fichte, a language is a *natural* phenomenon. Indeed, the possession of a shared language defines the natural boundaries of a *Volk* or *Nation*. To most moderns — heirs of the Enlightenment — the idea that languages are natural phenomena is counter-intuitive: following Hobbes and Locke, we tend to think of languages as conventional. We can get at what Fichte means by contrasting his theory of language to the antecedent theories of Locke and Locke's self-declared disciple Condillac.[31]

Locke's theory of language has three features that are relevant here. First, for Locke, the sign is *arbitrary*, in the sense that there is no reason why this word, rather than that one, could not have been chosen to signify the same idea. Second, it is *voluntary* — language consists of *acts* of particular individuals who voluntarily use a particular word to signify a particular idea. Third, these linguistic acts are *private*: words signify ideas in the speaker's mind, not external objects, nor others' ideas (and ideas are, according to Locke, private). So, Locke concludes, language is conventional or artificial, not natural.[32] But if the relation of signification between word and idea is arbitrary, voluntary and private, then how can we be sure that the same word signifies the same idea for different speakers? In other words, how can we be sure that we understand each other when we communicate? Locke paradoxically concludes that although language serves us well enough for our ordinary purposes, we do not really understand each other.[33]

Condillac agrees with Locke that languages are artificial. For Condillac, there are three kinds of sign: accidental signs, determined by circumstances (e.g. the smell of the cookies which reminds me of my grandmother); natural signs, which are biologically determined responses, such as a cry of joy, fear or pain; and instituted signs (*signes d'institution*), which are voluntary creations not determined by circumstance or physiological makeup (e.g. the word 'orange').[34] Human languages are dominated by the third type of sign, and so, Condillac concludes with Locke, they are artificial, not natural. So,

[31] My discussion of Locke and Condillac draws heavily on Talbot J. Taylor, *Mutual Misunderstanding: Scepticism and the Theorizing of Language and Interpretation* (Durham, NC, 1992).

[32] See John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P.H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), especially Book III, ch. 2 (pp. 404–8).

[33] *Ibid.*, Book III, chs. 9–11. This is what Talbot Taylor calls 'Locke's puzzle'.

[34] Condillac, *Essai sur l'origine des connoissances humaines*, in *Oeuvres philosophiques de Condillac*, ed. Georges Le Roy, Vol. 1 (Paris, 1947), Part I, section II, ch. IV, p. 19.

again, how can we be sure that, when two speakers speak the same artificial language, they are using the same code to analyse their thoughts and put them into verbal form? Condillac's solution is that while languages are indeed conventional or artificial, they are not *arbitrary* in the sense that they are for Locke.[35] Languages, and their component signs, did not develop arbitrarily: there is a *reason* for the choice of each word, and this reason is furnished by analogy with a natural sign. (For example, the sound used to signify the idea of an animal might have imitated the noise made by the animal. Presumably the sign for a soundless object would be a sound naturally analogous to some other sensory quality of the object: a soft surface would be signified by a soft sound, and so on.) Natural signs, because natural, have the same signification for all humans. So the argument is that the *development* of admittedly artificial linguistic conventions has a natural basis: artificial signs evolved by an unbroken, non-arbitrary process of development from natural signs. However, the problem is only postponed. If Condillac's account were plausible, it could potentially explain how speakers of the *same language* could understand each other. But then how could we be sure they were speaking the 'same' language?

Enter Fichte. In his *Reden* he too claims that the linguistic sign is not arbitrary; indeed, he pushes even further than Condillac.[36] There is an invariable fundamental law (*ein Grundgesetz*) that determines the sign, in the sense that the idea of every natural object elicits a definite sound from humans who are beginning to speak.[37] Fichte tries to suggest the plausibility of this apparently fanciful claim by drawing an analogy: just as natural objects produce a definite representation in the sense organs, so too do they produce a definite

[35] It is true that Condillac says, 'Les signes d'institution . . . n'ont qu'un rapport arbitraire avec nos idées' ('Signs of institution . . . have only an arbitrary relationship with our ideas'), and indeed uses '*signe arbitraire*' as a synonym for '*signe d'institution*' (*ibid.*). But here he does not mean what I mean by arbitrary, i.e. that there is no *reason* for the choice of words. He simply means that there is a choice of words, that the sign is used by choice. See Taylor, *Mutual Misunderstanding*, pp. 61–2.

[36] The view expounded in the *Reden* marks an important shift from Fichte's position on this issue in his 'Von der Sprachfëhigkeit und dem Ursprung der Sprache' of 1795, where signs are deemed to be arbitrary and voluntary. For an analysis (and English translation) of this text, see Jere Paul Surber, *Language and German Idealism: Fichte's Linguistic Philosophy* (New Jersey, 1996).

[37] 'Die Sprache überhaupt, und besonders die Bezeichnung der Gegenstände in derselben durch das Lautwerden der Sprachwerkzeuge, hängt keinesweges von *willkürlichen* Beschlüssen und Verabredungen ab, sondern es giebt zuvörderst ein *Grundgesetz*, nach welchem jedweder Begriff in den menschlichen Sprachwerkzeugen zu diesem, und keinem anderen Laute wird' ('Language in general, and especially the designation of objects in language by sounds from the organs of speech, is in no way dependent on *arbitrary* decisions and agreements. On the contrary, there is, to begin with, a *fundamental law*, in accordance with which every concept becomes in the human organs of speech one particular sound and no other'), *Reden*, p. 314 (56), my italics.

representation in the social organ of speech. The conclusion is that there is only a single human language![38] This apparently solves the problem of mutual understanding, which is secured by the fundamental law that explains the make-up of the single human language. But this account obviously raises its own problem: how to explain the empirical diversity of languages. Fichte's answer is: via secondary influences on the organ of speech. Both locality and the frequency of use of particular signs varied for different humans when language was first developing,[39] and these secondary influences introduced variation in their development. For example, in different localities, the order in which objects were observed and designated varied, with different results. But — and this is crucial for Fichte — these secondary influences were neither arbitrary nor indeterminate: they too operated via a fixed law. 'Jedoch findet auch hierin nicht Willkür oder Ohngefähr, sondern strenges Gesetz statt' ('However, here again one finds neither arbitrariness nor chance, but strict law').[40] This law operates at the level of words designating both sensuous and super-sensuous objects. Fichte believes that at first humans only designated sensuous objects. Only afterwards did people gradually gain super-sensuous perception and begin to designate super-sensuous objects (such as 'freedom') in language. But this designation occurred only via analogy with the sensuous.[41] In other words, language evolved via the actual observations of a historical people, according to a fundamental non-arbitrary law.

So for Fichte actual languages are not arbitrary, in three senses. First, they have a deep relation to nature. Language springs forth from the immediate force of nature (*Naturkraft*) in the sense that the object determines the sign. Second, and relatedly, language has a deep relation to the life of a people, in two senses: words influence life[42] and life influences language. Language develops out of the common life of a *Volk*. Third, the evolution of language is a continuous non-arbitrary stream out of the actual common life of a people.[43]

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[38] '[D]ie Sprache ist eine einzige und durchaus nothwendige' ('[T]here is only, and absolutely unavoidably, but a single language'), *Reden*, p. 315 (56).

[39] *Reden*, p. 315 (56).

[40] *Ibid.*

[41] *Ibid.*, pp. 316–17 (58).

[42] '. . . da die Sprache nicht durch Willkür vermittelt, sondern als *unmittelbare Naturkraft* aus dem verständigen Leben ausbricht, so hat eine ohne Abbruch nach diesem Gesetze fortentwickelte Sprache auch die *Kraft*, umittelbar einzugreifen in das Leben und dasselbe anzuregen' ('. . . since language is not mediated via arbitrary decision, but breaks forth out of the life of understanding as an *immediate force* of nature, a language continuously developed according to this law has also the *power* of immediately affecting and stimulating life'), *Reden*, pp. 318–19 (60–1), italics mine.

[43] '[E]s tritt in den Fluss der Bezeichnung keine Willkür ein' ('[I]nto the stream of designation (or: naming) no arbitrariness enters'), *Reden*, p. 319 (61). That Fichte grounds cultural nationalism in the non-arbitrariness of the linguistic sign requires a rethinking of Anderson's thesis that the non-arbitrariness of the sign, which he associates

So a language is *both* a child of nature *and* intimately bound up with the life of a people. Indeed, it provides a natural basis for distinguishing one people from another: a people is a group of individuals whose speech organs receive the same secondary influences over time,[44] i.e. one who speaks a common language. Just as its language persists over time, so too does the *Volk* itself.

III
Earthly Immortality

This fact about nations — that they persist over time — is the key to understanding why Fichte thinks nations inspire and motivate human beings beyond narrowly egoistic pursuits. In his *Reden*, Fichte delineates two types of motive for human action: material motives, which stem from the hope or fear of reward or punishment, and spiritual motives, which stem from moral (*sittlich*) approval or disapproval.[45] The state as such is concerned only with material motives: its ends consist in securing positive law, peace and material needs.[46] But reliance on solely material motives leads to pure self-seeking in government — and this, Fichte warns, would ultimately spell its collapse.[47] Thus Fichte calls for a new system of education that appeals to spiritual motives, in order to inspire a passion among Germans for the moral order.[48]

Here is the crux of the argument: the human will, Fichte asserts, acts only out of love,[49] and the true object of love is *eternal*.[50] Now, one way to seek eternity is to view the body as a cage, and to set one's sights on the afterlife. But Fichte calls this an abnormal, exceptional situation, one wrought by extreme hardship and misery. Under normal circumstances, noble persons hope to bestow eternity on their *earthly* work.[51] This longing for earthly eternity, for

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with *pre*-national sacred languages, had to be *overcome* to make possible imagining the nation. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, revised edition, 1991), p. 14.

[44] For Fichte, 'die unter denselben äusseren Einflüssen auf das Sprachwerkzeug stehenden, zusammenlebenden und in fortgesetzter Mittheilung ihre Sprache fortbildenden Menschen' ('men whose organs of speech are influenced by the same external conditions, who live together, and who develop their language in continuous communication with each other') comprise 'ein Volk'. *Reden*, p. 315 (56).

[45] *Ibid.*, p. 273 (12).

[46] *Ibid.*, p. 384 (138).

[47] *Ibid.*, pp. 270–1 (8–9).

[48] *Ibid.*, pp. 274–5 (12–14).

[49] '[D]er Mensch kann nur dasjenige wollen, was er liebt; seine Liebe ist der einzige, zugleich auch der unfehlbare Atrieb seines Wollens und aller seiner Lebensregung und Bewegung' ('[T]he human being can only will what he loves; his love is the sole as well as the unfailing motive of his will and of all his life impulse and activity'), *Reden*, p. 283 (22).

[50] *Ibid.*, p. 383 (136–7).

[51] *Ibid.*, pp. 378–80 (131–3).

a *sacred* earthly order that is eternal, is precisely the promise of a *people that persists over generations*: a nation that not only shares a language, but also one that shares it over time.[52] This is what explains the *Reden*'s subtle slide from linguistic to ethnic nationalism, why Fichte begins with an uncompromisingly linguistic–cultural conception of the nation, but ends up speaking of descent (*Abstammung*, *Abkunft*). The eternal order by which the noble person is moved, the 'Ordenung der Dinge, die er für selbst ewig und für fähig, ewiges in sich aufzunehmen, anzuerkennen vermöchte' (the 'order of things, which he can acknowledge as in itself eternal and capable of absorbing into itself that which is eternal'), is 'das Volk, *von welchem er abstammt*' — the people *from which he is descended*.[53] A nation is not just a people with a shared language, but one of common descent through time.

Thus the nation is the only sacred earthly embodiment of eternity, according to the fundamental law. This makes it the locus of freedom. In his *Reden*, Fichte distinguishes two kinds of freedom: a lesser freedom and a higher freedom.[54] Lesser freedom is merely the hesitation (*Schwanken*) of the will between good and evil: it is indecision or arbitrariness. Higher freedom is the virtuosity of the will, reflecting its capacity for creativity and originality. Here the will taps into something beyond the phenomenal realm of natural causation, into the sacred realm of the eternal, which produces a supplement (*ein Mehr*) that cannot be explained by reference to the natural laws pertaining to the world of appearances (*Erscheinung*).[55] It is within the context of a living nation that one can attain this higher freedom: in the nation, individuals deposit their creativity, their supplement, as a contribution to the life of their people. While the individual's supplement is not the mere result of 'des geistigen Naturgesetzes seiner Nation' ('the spiritual law of nature of his nation'), its embodiment does occur according to the nation's spiritual law of nature: his 'Werk' finds 'einen sinnlichen Ausdruck' ('a sensual expression') only according to that law. In turn, the nation's law is influenced by the individual's contribution, whose improvement (*Ausbildung*) is carried on by that *Volk*, so long as the people itself remains, and remains itself ('so lange dieses selbst bleibt').[56] As such, the nation becomes an embodiment of one's higher freedom: expressive creativity. This is why, for Fichte, true freedom ends up meaning the freedom to be German.[57] The nation (and its language) is the sacred site of the divine in history: 'Es ist Göttliches in ihm erschienen . . .'[58] But to tap into the realm of eternity the nation needs to maintain its identity

[52] *Ibid.*, pp. 380–3 (133–6).
[53] *Ibid.*, pp. 380–1 (134), italics mine.
[54] *Ibid.*, p. 372 (123).
[55] *Ibid.*, pp. 371 (122), 369 (120).
[56] *Ibid.*, p. 381 (134).
[57] *Ibid.*, pp. 382–3 (135–6).
[58] 'The divine has appeared in it . . .', *ibid.*, p. 383 (136).

intact over time, i.e. higher freedom is possible only *so long as the people remains itself*. The motivation problem is solved only insofar as some thing of nature anchors the national identity in the face of historical change. In other words, to solve the motivation problem, the nation must be natural not just in a static sense, but in a dynamic sense as well. Not only must it have a natural basis for its boundaries *now*, but its sacred order needs a natural basis to maintain a single identity over time. The latter is what descent provides for the individual: 'The eternal order of things in which he places his portion of eternity' is grounded in 'his love for his people' from which he is honoured to be descended ('mit der Abstammung daraus sich ehrend').[59] The nation's common *Abstammung*, and one's sense of 'honour' in such descent, is what solves the motivation problem over time. Language must coincide with descent.

IV
The 'Open Nation' Interpretation: Textual Evidence

I have argued, then, that the *Reden* begins with an officially linguistic–cultural definition of the nation, but that Fichte is compelled by the logic of his own nationalist argument to end up collapsing the linguistic nation into an ethnic one. I have argued, in other words, that the *Reden* constitute a crypto- or mediated ethnic nationalist text. What is important about this account is that it does two things at once: it accounts both for the textual evidence *and* for the logic of Fichte's argument; moreover, in treating the textual evidence, it accounts for both the linguistic–cultural elements of Fichte's text *and* the genealogical language of *Abstammung* and *Abkunft* to which Fichte resorts. This, I take it, is a minimum standard that any competing interpretation must meet. I will therefore consider the most important textual evidence in light of the historical context in favour of the competing 'open nation' reading, followed in the next section by objections to my reading that appeal directly to the logic of Fichte's nationalist argument.

There are two key passages that at first glance appear to sit poorly with an ethnic nationalist reading of the *Reden*. The first comes from the end of the Seventh Address. This passage has been the linchpin of the dominant French 'open nation' interpretation, and any challenge to that interpretation must account for it. Fichte there declares that

> whoever believes in spirituality and in the freedom of this spirituality, and who wills the eternal development of this spirituality by freedom, wherever he may have been born and whatever language he speaks, is of our kin (*unsers Geschlechts*); he is one of us, and will come over to our side. Whoever believes in stagnation, retrogression . . . wherever he may have been

[59] *Ibid.*

> born and whatever language he speaks, is non-German and a stranger to us.[60]

Renaut concludes that, with this 'stupefying text', Fichte

> decisively breaks with Romanticism's naturalization of the nation: a German here is no longer the depository of some national genius inscribed in language; he is one who subscribes to the universal values of the spirit and of liberty. As a matter of right (*En droit*), therefore, the German nation is open to all, wherever they might come from and whatever be their past.[61]

The problem for Renaut is that *this* was not the 'open nation' reading that he was seeking. Renaut, it will be recalled, was trying to show that Fichte *is* a cultural-linguistic nationalist, but not an ethnic one. Even if this passage did support an 'open nation' reading — and it does not — the open nation it would support would be too open for Renaut's purposes. Gueroult's similar attempt to enlist this passage in favour of a non-genealogical interpretation demonstrates the problem:

> [I]t is no longer race that defines this 'absolute people', but rather its aptitude for liberty and its revolutionary mission. The word *German thus takes on an entirely cosmopolitan signification* . . . As such spirituality is no longer a privilege resulting from Germanic ethnicity, but Germanness itself results from profound spirituality, independently of any reference whatsoever to ethnic, linguistic, or geographic characteristics . . . *Germanness* no longer designates anything but the character possessed by all those who recognize themselves as belonging together to a single fraternal humanity (a people).[62]

If we distinguish between three criteria according to which nationality might be defined — the genealogical/ethnic criterion of shared descent; the criterion of historically shared language and culture; and the ideological criterion of a shared belief in freedom — then Gueroult is suggesting that this passage marks the ideological criterion as a necessary and sufficient condition for German nationality. In other words, even *language* would fail to be a criterion of national membership. But as my discussion of Fichte's text above makes clear, this reading would make nonsense of a good deal of the *Reden* — which is why Renaut, rightly, does not adopt it elsewhere.

How, then, are we to make sense of the passage? Even taken in isolation, its meaning is more ambiguous than that supposed by Renaut and Gueroult. It might with equal facility, for instance, be cited in support of Rocker's hostile evaluation that not only did Fichte designate 'the German nation as destined by fate to be the "mother and reconstructor" of humanity', but also that, thanks to his 'obstinately authoritarian character', he 'condemned and

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[60] *Ibid.*, p. 375 (126–7).

[61] Renaut, 'Présentation', p. 32.

[62] Gueroult, 'Fichte et la Révolution française', pp. 240–1, italics in original.

excommunicated everything which did not fit into his concept of what constitutes "Germanism" '.[63] A more balanced reading requires placing the passage in context; in particular, the problem with the Renaut–Gueroult interpretation is that it requires reading this passage, first, in isolation from the *Reden*'s historical–political context and rhetorical intent and, second, in isolation from its textual context in the *Reden* as a whole.

Renaut and Gueroult read this passage as if it were a purely 'philosophical' act, i.e. a conceptual clarification of the meaning of a key term. But it is clear that Fichte understood the delivery of the *Reden* in 1807–8 to be a *political act* intended to 'rouse' the German nation against the Napoleonic yoke.[64] The rhetorical character of the *Reden* as a whole, and in particular their political intent, suggests that Fichte, far from *redefining* the empirical manifestation of Germanness in ideological terms, in terms of a set of values, is here, rather, *exhorting* empirically existing Germans to live up to their true metaphysically given spiritual and political potential. These are, after all, addresses to the German nation and, given their political nature, we should assume that Fichte is philosophically engaged in conceptual clarification only when there is solid evidence to that effect. In fact, Fichte has, in the Fourth Address, already explicitly defined the empirical manifestation of Germanness *linguistically* in contrast to what other Teutons lack. If there is a definitional component to the passage in question, then Fichte can only be understood to be exhorting empirically existing Germans (already defined linguistically, if not genealogically) to live up to the metaphysical potential (defined here in terms of liberty). Indeed, that is what Fichte says he is doing, in the sentence immediately preceding the passage Renaut quotes: '. . . a proposal (*Antrag*) is being made to it [this nation] . . . to make itself wholly and completely what it ought to be'.[65] That the belief in freedom represents the true, metaphysical potential of the German nation, rather than its empirical *differentia*, is clear not only from the rhetorical character of the *Reden* and from Fichte's stated purpose, but also from the textual context: the quoted paragraph immediately follows Fichte's only extended metaphysical discussion in the whole of the *Reden*. As we have seen, this metaphysical potential for freedom enjoyed by the German nation exists thanks to the unique character of the German *language*. *Pace* Renaut, an empirically existing German precisely *is* 'the depository of some national genius inscribed in language', a genius that defines the German's metaphysical potential.[66]

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[63] Rocker, *Nationalism and Culture*, p. 192.

[64] On the nature of the *Reden* as a political act, see Léon, *Fichte et son temps*, Vol. II, 2, p. 119.

[65] *Reden*, p. 375 (126).

[66] Hans Kohn picks up on a similar distinction in Fichte, between the Germans as they are and the Germans as they ought to be, and argues that Fichte systematically confused and conflated the two: '[A]gain and again he seemed to confuse the ideal and the

But even if the passage in question does not support the *ideological* version of the 'open nation' interpretation that Gueroult adopts and to which Renaut is drawn, a defender of the non-ethnic 'open nation' interpretation could still return to the contention that a shared language and its associated culture is a necessary and sufficient condition for shared nationality. The problem for the linguistic–cultural view manifests itself again, however, if we compare Fichte's formulation just a few sentences earlier, in the same paragraph, to the 'stupefying text' that Renaut quotes. Fichte is making essentially the same point, not defining Germanness, but exhorting Germans to realize their metaphysical potential, their 'true' differentiating criterion; but once again, the empirical boundaries of the German nation are specified by reference to a *genealogical* criterion:

> And so let there finally appear with perfect clarity what we have meant, in our portrayal so far, by Germans. The true differentiating criterion (*eigentliche Unterscheidungsgrund*) is this: whether one believes in something absolutely primary and originary in mankind itself, in freedom, in endless improvement, in the eternal progress of our kin [or: of our race/clan (*unsers Geschlechts*)].[67]

'*Unsers Geschlechts*' here has an empirical referent given prior to the belief in freedom: the belief in freedom provides the 'true' differentiating criterion being *urged* upon the members of the (antecedently and genealogically defined) clan as a realization of their metaphysical potential. Renaut must have intuitively sensed the danger that this passage poses to his interpretation: in his French translation, '*unsers Geschlechts*' becomes the impeccably universalist and non-ethnic '*de l'espèce*'. While dropping the possessive pronoun is a clear distortion of the text, the rendering of '*Geschlecht*' as '*espèce*' is equally but more subtly problematic in this context. It is a subtler distortion because in many contexts 'Geschlecht' could indeed mean species. In isolation, this reading of the sentence is in principle plausible: Fichte would be read here as urging Germans to rise to their 'true' potential as an agent for the progress of the entire human species, a world-historical role he in fact did envision for Germans. The problem is, however, that Fichte uses

real and to attribute to the actual Germans those qualities which in other passages were clearly reserved to the "true" German completely remade by the new education. This confusion of the historical reality and the metaphysical ideal was a dangerous legacy which Fichte's *Reden* bequeathed to German nationalism.' Kohn, *Prelude to Nation-States*, pp. 240–1. Kohn's reading is much more plausible than, say, Gueroult's, but if Kohn is right, then Fichte has committed an egregious and entirely obvious analytical error with respect to one of the *Reden*'s key concepts. My reading does not attribute stupidity to Fichte: he is not confusing the two different concepts; he is putting them to rhetorical use for his own clear ends. See also Balibar's reading of this tension (Etienne Balibar, 'Fichte et la frontière intérieure: A propos des *Discours à la nation allemande*', *Les Cahiers de Fontenay*, 58/59 (June 1990), pp. 57–81, at p. 80).

[67] *Reden*, p. 374 (125).

the expression '*unsers Geschlects*' not once, but twice in this paragraph: he also uses it in the 'stupefying' passage that Renaut and Gueroult quote. There '*unsers Geschlects*' clearly does *not* mean 'our species'. Recall the passage: Fichte says that whoever believes in 'spirituality by freedom, wherever he may have been born and whatever language he speaks, is of our kin (*unsers Geschlechts*)', and that, by contrast, 'Whoever believes in stagnation . . . is non-German (*undeutsch*) and a stranger to us'.[68] To interpret '*unsers Geschlects*' here as 'our species' (as Renaut does) is to forget that Fichte is explicitly telling us what it is to be a true *German*: the contrast with '*unsers Geschlects*' is '*undeutsch*', not 'non-human'. The meaning of *Geschlect* corresponds to the first and most important entry given in the nineteenth-century *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm*: 'die gesamtheit der von einem stammvater herkommenden' ('the entirety of those who come from a single forefather'), which is variously glossed as 'die blutsverwandte familie, die sippe' ('blood relatives, the clan') and 'nachkommenschaft' ('descendants').[69]

The second passage that appears to support the 'open nation' interpretation comes from the Fourth Address. It is the passage I have already mentioned, in which Fichte dismisses 'purity of descent' as insignificant (*unbedeutend*) for distinguishing between Germans and other peoples of Teutonic descent. Intermixing between Teutons and other peoples, Fichte says, both in the ancestral lands and in conquered lands, has meant that 'it would not be easy nowadays for any one people descended from Teutons to demonstrate a greater purity of descent (*Reinheit seiner Abstammung*) than the others'.[70] The crucial difference, he argues, is linguistic: Germans, in contrast to other

[68] *Ibid.*, p. 375 (126–7).

[69] This is the first of six main entries for *Geschlect* in the *Wörterbuch*. The second entry, like the first, also provides a clearly particularistic, genealogical meaning: an individual who stands in for the clan. The third entry, also genealogical, has seven subheadings and refers to the 'extended meaning' (*erweiterter bedeutung*) of the word. The first few subheadings provide particularist definitions: the first subheading, for example, glosses *Geschlect* as '*stamm*', as in 'die zwelff geschlechte Israel' ('the twelve tribes of Israel'), while the second glosses it as a '*volk*', whether of place or language. The fourth subheading of the extended meaning finally provides the more universalist definition Renaut is looking for: 'im singular, auf die ganze menschheit bezogen, nach ihrer abstammung von einem stammvater, das *menschengeschlecht*' ('in the singular, all of mankind related by descent from a single forefather, the *human race*'). But the examples the *Wörterbuch* provides tend to make the scope of the term explicit, as in 'das geschlecht der menschen' (quoted from Schiller). The fourth entry of the dictionary refers to gender; the fifth refers to the natural qualities of an object. The sixth and final entry of the *Wörterbuch* glosses the term as '*gattung, art*' ('kind'), and provides classifications of animals and plants as examples. See Rudolf Hildebrand and Hermann Wunderlich, *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm*, Vol.14, section 1, part 2 (Leipzig, 1897), pp. 3903–18.

[70] *Reden*, pp. 313–14 (55).

Teutons — the Franks above all — have maintained the German language. This is precisely the passage that Etienne Balibar emphasizes when he argues that Fichte follows Kant in 'the complete dissociation of the notions of race and people' — in effect agreeing with Renaut's thesis that Fichte is not an ethnic nationalist. 'Anthropological unity', Balibar concludes, 'is not genealogical' for Fichte.[71]

The passage does indeed speak against seeing Fichte as a racist champion of unmediated ethnic nationalism, but Balibar's more far-reaching conclusion relies on a slight exaggeration. While it is true that Fichte is here specifying criteria for distinguishing the members of the German nation, he is not doing so in general. Fichte is taking for granted that he is distinguishing *amongst* Teutons, all of whom are already supposed to share a common genealogy. So while it is true that Fichte says that purity of descent is insignificant in distinguishing between Germans and other Teutons, the passage continues to assume that one is a Teuton by virtue of having (at least some) Teutonic ancestors. Fichte is rejecting *purity* of descent, not descent as such, as a criterion. The very title of the fourth address — 'Hauptverschiedenheit zwischen den Deutschen und den übrigen Volkern germanischer Abkunft' ('The Chief Difference between the Germans and the other Peoples of Teutonic Descent') — already alerts us to this genealogical component. So, too, does his statement, in the second paragraph, that 'Der Deutsche ist zuvörderst ein Stamm der Germanier uberhaupt' ('The Germans are first and foremost a branch of the Teutons').[72] Renaut's rendering of this sentence as 'L'Allemand est avant tout un héritier de ce qu'étaient les Germains en général' is entirely suspect: it completely erases the genealogical connotations of the original by suppressing the term '*Stamm*'.[73] Accounting for Fichte's genealogical language surely does not mean excising it from the text.

V
The Logic of Fichte's Argument: Descent or Culture?

The most difficult textual evidence, then, is consistent with the *Reden*'s ultimately ethnic nationalist character. But the defender of the 'open nation' interpretation may now take issue with the way in which I have explained the co-existence of both linguistic nationalist and ethnic nationalist language in Fichte's text. It might be objected, in other words, that I have misconstrued the logic of Fichte's nationalism. Recall my argument that the reason Fichte is compelled to resort to genealogical language is in order to solve the motivation problem. More particularly, to motivate individuals with a promise of

[71] Balibar, 'Fichte et la frontière intérieure', p. 73.

[72] *Reden*, p. 311 (52).

[73] This is despite the fact that in the sixth paragraph (*Reden*, p. 314), where Fichte is engaged in *denying* the importance of (purity of) descent, Renaut does not hesitate to render the German '*Stamme*' by the French '*branche*'.

eternity, the nation requires a natural anchor to secure a single continuous national identity *over time*. Now, it might be objected that while Fichte may indeed require such a natural anchor over time, this anchor need not be lodged in descent. Perhaps, on Fichte's account, language itself could solve the over-time identity problem and so promise eternity. After all, for Fichte language is not just natural in the sense that the adoption of particular signs is governed by non-arbitrary laws of nature, but also in the dynamic sense that particular languages *evolve* via the actual observations of a historical people, according to a fundamental non-arbitrary law. This means that even if previous generations' speech would be incomprehensible to the current one because of changes over time, it is still the *same language* thanks to its continuous, non-arbitrary history: 'Darum bleibt auch die Sprache immer dieselbe Sprache' ('Thus the language always also remains the same language').[74] Language, it seems, provides not just a static but also a dynamic ground in nature. Descent does not seem necessary to secure a single identity over time.

The upshot of this objection is that Fichte's genealogical flourishes are simply that: flourishes or incidental lapses that could (and should) have been avoided, lapses that are insignificant to the overall spirit of his argument. This deflated interpretive strategy, of course, essentially seeks to save Fichte from himself: it consists in a strategy of sympathetic reconstruction on behalf of Fichte *despite* Fichte's own appeals to genealogy in the *Reden*.[75]

But even this deflated interpretative strategy faces a complication. The problem is that, for Fichte, not just *any* sort of national language, with just any evolutionary history, is sufficient to transform the nation into the sacred site of eternity and divinity, the locus of expressive freedom, which is the source of its motivational power. This expressive freedom requires a particular sort of historical evolution: it requires a *living* and *original* language; and it turns out that when Fichte comes to describe this process which truly secures a language's identity over time — i.e. when he comes to say exactly what an original language is — he is again compelled to resort to the language of genealogy: expressive freedom and its promise of eternity requires 'die *ursprüngliche* Sprache des *Stammvolkes*' — the original language of one's ancestral people.[76] It is true that Fichte's *denial*, cited above, that 'purity of descent' is required follows in the next few paragraphs; the point is, however,

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[74] *Reden*, p. 316 (57).

[75] Such a defence would require reconstructing the spirit of the *Reden*'s argument by emphasizing related texts from the period, such as *Die Grundzüge des gegenwartigen Zeitalters* of 1806, in which Fichte places greater emphasis on the progress of humanity (available in English as *The Characteristics of the Present Age* in Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Popular Works of Johann Gottlieb Fichte*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. William Smith, Vol. 2 (Bristol, 4th edn., 1999)).

[76] *Reden*, p. 313 (54), emphasis mine.

that *Fichte cannot tell us what makes a language* ursprünglich *without making reference to ancestors*. Expressive freedom requires the historic language of one's *ancestral* people, organically linked with (indeed, arising out of) the people's 'own' historical experiences, uncorrupted by foreign influences — where the notion of foreignness tacitly relies on the over-time boundary of descent that constitutes the *Stammvolk*. Infiltrated by foreign elements, the national language would lose its anchor in the nation's history — which, it will be recalled, is subject to a non-arbitrary law — thereby becoming a corrupt and dead language incapable of harbouring expressive freedom.[77] Language must indeed coincide with descent.

But again it may be objected that Fichte's rich account of the process of linguistic corruption suggests that the notion of foreignness, even dynamically, does not require a genealogical component — that it requires language to coincide with *culture* as a whole, but not with descent. Fichte suggests that to adopt a foreign tongue as one's own, without also fully adopting the cultural way of life and history of the people whose language it originally was — what Fichte calls its sphere of observation (*der Kreis* or *Umkreis der Auschauungen*) — would spell catastrophe for the nation, tearing it from the historical roots that anchor its linguistic life in nature.[78] The problem does not arise at the level of *sensuous* words that refer to (ideas of) objects still present in national life, for their meaning is fixed by the objects they represent, via the continuing *presence* of the objects themselves.[79] Rather, the problem arises at the level of super-sensuous words, words that are the basis for the cultural and spiritual flourishing of a people striving for higher freedom. The super-sensuous sign would be stripped of its basis in nature, thus becoming arbitrary, and hence meaningless for the nation. In one's own historical language, the verbal image (*das Sinnbild*) is linked to the sensory observations (*die sinnlichen Anschauungen*) the people has historically made, observations that secure a live, natural meaning for super-sensuous words. But when sensory observations are detached from the verbal image, by adopting foreign words developed during the course of a set of sensory observations not belonging to one's own history, the sign no longer has any relation to the sensory observations of the nation that imports it. The sign loses its connection to the original force of nature. It loses its anchor in the nation's history — it becomes arbitrary, dead. The nation loses its capacity for creative agency. It becomes corrupt.[80]

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[77] On this point, see Martyn, 'Borrowed Fatherland'.

[78] *Reden*, pp. 320–1 (62–3).

[79] '[J]edes Zeichen aber in diesem sinnlichen Umkreise kann durch die unmittelbare Ansicht oder Berührung des Bezeichneten vollkommen klar gemacht werden' ('But in this sphere of the senses every sign can be made completely clear by directly viewing or touching [or: via the unmediated viewing or touching of] that which is designated'), *Reden*, p. 320 (62–3).

[80] *Ibid.*, pp. 320–1 (62–3).

Fortunately for the Germans, they have preserved their original, living language:[81] neither the sensuous nor the super-sensuous part of their language is arbitrary. Their language comes from 'the whole previous life of the nation'. The sign remains alive and sensuous: like Rousseau's melodic southern tongue, it stimulates the senses without mediation:

> The sign [in such a language] is itself living and sensuous without mediation (*unmittelbar lebendig und sinnlich*), re-presenting (*wieder darstellend*) the whole of actual [or: original] life . . . To the possessor of such a language, spirit speaks without mediation, and reveals itself as man does to man. But the sign of a dead language stimulates [or: moves] nothing directly (*unmittelbar*).[82]

The implication of the foregoing account might be that one can adopt the language of others' ancestors, as long as one also adopts the historical and cultural totality from which that language arose, i.e. that, dynamically, language must cohere with culture, but not necessarily with descent. This would be to interpret Fichte's dynamic account of corruption by foreign elements with the most 'open' and least genealogical spin possible, a spin that is necessary to salvage the interpretation favoured by Gueroult, Renaut, and Balibar. But, once again, that interpretive spin is countered by both the direct textual evidence and the logic of Fichte's argument.

The most immediate textual problem for Fichte's French commentators is his use of genealogical language in precisely the moment that is most compromising to the salvage that they are attempting. Fichte says:

> [T]he first, original, and truly natural boundaries of States are beyond doubt their inner boundaries. Those who speak the same language are, long before any human art (*Kunst*) begins, by unadorned nature (*blosse Natur*) herself already joined together by a multitude of invisible bonds; they understand each other and are capable of making themselves understood to one another ever more clearly; they belong together, and are by nature one, an inseparable whole. Such [a whole] cannot wish to absorb or mix with [or: interbreed with (*mit vermischen*)] any people of different descent (*Abkunft*) and language without at least at first becoming confused (*sich zu verwirren*), and violently disturbing the even progress of its culture (*Bildung*).[83]

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[81] *Ibid.*, p. 314 (55).

[82] 'Das Zeichen in der letzten [in einer lebendigen Sprache] ist selbst unmittelbar lebendig und sinnlich und wieder darstellend das ganze eigene Leben . . . mit dem Besitzer einer solchen Sprache spricht unmittelbar der Geist, und offenbart sich ihm, wie ein Mann dem Manne. Dagegen regt das Zeichen einer todten Sprache unmittelbar nichts an.' *Ibid.*, p. 332 (76–7).

[83] '[D]ie ersten, ürsprunglichen und warhaft naturlichen Grenzen der Staaten sind ohne Zweifel ihre inneren Grenzen. Was diselbe Sprache redet, das ist schon vor aller menschlichen Kunst vorher durch die blosse Natur mit einer Menge von unsichtbaren Banden aneinander geknüpft; es versteht sich untereinander, und ist fähig, sich immerfort klarer zu verständigen, es gehört zusammen, und ist natürlich Eins und ein unzertrenn-

Passages such as these, in which descent and language appear as an indissoluble pair, make the view that Fichte was not an ethnic nationalist problematic,[84] for the subtle slide from language to descent appears at the crucial moment where the 'open nation' interpretation requires it not to be there. Ernest Renan's observation in 1882 about the rhetorical structure of the debates of his century is perhaps nowhere more germane than in relation to Fichte: 'The political importance attached to languages comes from the fact that they are regarded as signs of race.'[85]

The *coup de grâce* comes from the fact of Fichte's notorious chauvinism: today, Fichte claims, *only* the Germans are a proper nation with an original, living language.[86] (Fichte, it should be said on his behalf, is generous enough to the rest of humanity to signal that *in principle* there might be other such peoples too; he just doesn't know of any.) By contrast to the Germans, the Franks — who are also Teutons by descent, but who have adopted a neo-Latin tongue — possess a dead language. Fichte ostensibly speaks of the nation in open terms only when he is speaking of non-Germans adopting *German* nationality (language *and* culture); but when it is a matter of a person of Germanic (i.e. Teutonic) descent adopting a foreign tongue, he tightens the national boundaries genealogically. In other words, the ethnic character of Fichte's nationalism is obscured for the twenty-first-century reader, because we tend to think of genealogical limits on *entry*, rather than *exit*, as the *sine qua non* of an ethnic doctrine, and Fichte seems to go soft on entry. But we should not be fooled: this 'softness' is the result not of the lack of a genealogical doctrine, but of the combination of genealogy with chauvinism. The moments in which Fichte's genealogical boundaries go soft are those in which he is driven by the thought that *of course* non-Germans would do well to adopt the totality of the German *Bildung*; it is the only culture on offer with a living language. Notice the implication. It will not do to say that Fichte's chauvinism is a contingent feature of his doctrine,[87] and that, stripped of its chauvinism, his account would have been less genealogically bound. On the contrary, it

liches Ganzes. Ein solches kann kein Volk anderer Abkunft und Sprache in sich aufnehmen und mit vermischen wollen, ohne wenigstens fürs erste sich zu verwirren, und den gleichmässigen Fortgang seiner Bildung mächtig zu stören.' *Ibid.*, p. 460 (223–4). For extensive commentary on this passage, see Balibar, 'Fichte et la frontière intérieure'.

[84] Even if the 'furs erste' clause meant that in theory ethnic entry or exit were possible, it is certainly not desirable. Even *if* Fichte were not in principle an ethnic nationalist, *in practice* he still would be: the total adoption of the whole of another culture and language is, for Fichte, almost impossible.

[85] Ernest Renan, 'Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?', *Oeuvres complètes de Ernest Renan*, ed. Henriette Psichari, Vol. 1 (Paris, 1947 (1882)), p. 900.

[86] *Reden*, seventh address.

[87] Cf. Dumont's argument about the essential role of hierarchy in Fichte's text, in 'Une variante nationale'.

would have been *more* genealogically bound: if the contemporary world were full of living languages, then there would be *no* good reason why the ethnic criterion of national membership should be relaxed. In other words, one must choose: a 'Fichtean' who gives up the *Reden*'s chauvinism cannot also give up the genealogical features of the theory advanced therein.[88]

VI
Conclusion

Ultimately, then, the motivating nation is natural in two senses: it possesses a natural boundary to mark members off from non-members (language), and it is passed on through time via descent (ethnicity). As the legitimate basis for the state, it provides its natural boundaries. The nation-state potentially and ideally possesses a natural, prepolitical bond, and to weaken that bond one need only dilute its constituents with foreign elements. To dislodge its natural anchor over time would also be to undermine the nation's bid to be the sacred site of eternity.

Now we have all of Fichte's reasons for why the nation can so inspire its members. In the first place, the (true, i.e. German) nation is based in nature: its defining feature is a shared language, and a shared language springs forth from nature according to a fundamental natural law. The nation moves us because language as such is part and parcel of the same nature, so to speak, that flows through our veins. In the second place, the nation moves us because it promises us immortality on earth, and thus is an object worthy of our love. It offers us immortality because it persists through time, and does so while embodying our expressive acts of creative freedom that contribute to the life of the nation. The nation is not just *natural*, it is also *sacred*, the immortal site of divinity; and what allows it to persist through time is that it is defined by a language which, because it evolves in a continuous non-arbitrary way according to natural evolutionary laws, possesses a single identity passed on to our descendants over time. The nation moves us because its particular language is literally passed on through the blood that flows in our veins.

So Fichte does not, in the end, provide defenders of a non-ethnic cultural nationalism with much room for optimism. On the contrary, an analysis of

[88] Since my focus has been on whether the *Reden* in particular constitutes an ethnic nationalist text, and since the *Reden* do not refer to Jews, I have not raised the issue of Fichte's attitude towards Jews as an objection to the non-ethnic reading of the *Reden* that I am challenging. Fichte's notorious and brutal attempt to express his views about Jews with a touch of 'humour' — he said that, in order to prevent Jews from corrupting Christians, it would be necessary to 'cut off all their heads in one night and replace them with others in which there is not a single Jewish idea' — was written in 1793 as part of a diatribe in the *Beitrag zur Berichtigung des Publikums über die französische Revolution* (quoted in La Volpa, *Fichte*, p. 132). As La Volpa points out, 'the Jew-hatred of the *Contribution* is largely absent from Fichte's later writings' (*Fichte*, p. 135). See ch. 5 of La Volpa's book for a more extensive discussion of Fichte's attitude towards Jews.

Fichte reveals why the discursive logic of cultural nationalism may have a tendency to propel its own collapse into its ethnic kin. Part of the cultural nation's appeal is that it is supposed to solve the motivation problem. In particular, the nation is supposed to mobilize citizens around socially integrative political projects by incorporating the naturally mortal individual into a greater collective self that promises a form of immortality.[89] The problem is to know how the collective self of the future can be the *same* collective self into which the present individual is to be incorporated. Some link of continuity is needed. Ostensibly, cultural nationalism's answer is that the collective national self persists through time in the set of individuals who continue to bear the same national culture. But now we need to know how, in the face of the inevitable cultural changes, the future culture can be seen as the *same* as the current one.

The cultural nationalist is already committed to the reification of 'culture' as an entity with distinct boundaries but now needs to go further and defend those boundaries through time as well. He or she needs to identify some 'essence' of the cultural nation, an essence whose own persistence explains the nation's persistence in the face of cultural change. The cultural nationalist must either locate that essence in some set of core cultural practices, or find some extra-cultural supplement that secures over-time identity. Neither solution is attractive. It is tempting for the cultural nationalist to suppose that a culture's essence can consist in some core cultural practice(s) whose purity over the generations must be defended at all costs: *this* bit of our culture cannot be changed. The problem is not just that this option amounts to an extremely reactionary cultural conservatism; it is also that each generation's view of what the essential cultural core consists in may itself change.[90] Turning to the second option, the most obvious — though certainly not the only — extra-cultural candidate is blood. The boundary of cultural continuity is to be genealogically secured here: this is the supplement that Fichte's cultural nationalism draws on, and it is a supplement to which cultural nationalist politics in practice has found itself drawn again and again. This collapse into ethnic nationalism is neither a logically necessary consequence[91] nor a random

[89] This promise of immortality is what Anderson identifies as the source of the nation's power as well, in *Imagined Communities*.

[90] A frequent observation about Québécois cultural nationalism, for instance, is that this 'cultural core' was previously located in the Roman Catholic religion, whereas today's nationalists locate it in the French language. Of course neither of these two are static entities either.

[91] Another option besides blood is, of course, the soil. But this never really solves the problem, for soil by itself cannot really tell us *who*, over time, the members of the cultural nation are. On the one hand, if we say that over time the nation is instantiated by whoever happens to be on (or exercises effective control over) a plot of land, the link to culture has been lost. If, on the other hand, we say that the nation is instantiated by those who continue to practise the same culture previously practised on this plot of land, either this begs

occurrence: it results from some identifiable discursive features of cultural nationalist ideology. If contemporary cultural nationalists have something to learn from Fichte, it is not, as Renaut suggests, how to proceed; it is, rather, to know something of the ethnic pathology that lurks beneath the cultural surface.[92]

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the question or it collapses into a genealogical account. Another frequent suggestion is that continuity is secured by the fact of a 'shared history'. But as Appiah has demonstrated, this answer logically begs the question as well. See Anthony Appiah, 'The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race', in *'Race,' Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago, 1986), pp. 21–37, at p. 27.

[92] This is not to say that crypto-ethnic cultural nationalism plays itself out politically in the same manner as does unmediated ethnic nationalism. The mediation involved in the former variety places constraints upon its ethnicism that are altogether missing in the latter. This is why it matters that the *Reden* cannot be *equated* with the character that German nationalism subsequently took.