



BOOK REVIEWS

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Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Addresses to the German Nation*, ed. Gregory Moore (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2008), xlv + 202 pp., £15.99, ISBN 978 0 521 448734.

It is a widely held view among the commentators of Fichte's social and political writings that his *Addresses to the German Nation* (1807–8) indicate a significant shift in that body of work. This shift is said to apply mainly to the way Fichte conceived of the foundations of social order. According to this view, Fichte moved away from a position that regarded a general accord on the content of mutual rights as sufficient to constitute a social union and came to believe that a shared 'cultural' or 'national' identity is equally necessary for the making of a society.

While commentators have rightly recognized this transformation in Fichte's social and political thought, they have not been as successful in reaching a consensus on the precise nature of Fichte's later view. Some have argued that Fichte's 'nationalistic turn' was merely a knee-jerk political response to Napoleonic victories in German territories, and that he soon after returned to his settled, considered 'cosmopolitan' outlook, according to which relations of all individuals in all states must be ordered entirely in accordance with the 'eternal law of reason'.¹ Alternatively, others have argued that Fichte's *Addresses* are a result of a natural progression of his practical philosophy, and in particular of his growing awareness of the relevance of particular linguistic, religious or cultural identities for the formation (and decay) of actual societies, and thus for the possible realization of freedom in the world.² Yet another group of scholars have denied the alleged import of Fichte's patriotism and suggested that whatever he had to say about it in the *Addresses* did not amount to a revision of his belief in the universal values of liberty and equality.³

The above is only a sketch of some of the issues motivating the growing body of secondary literature on the *Addresses*, and there is a great deal more to be explored in order to understand what exactly Fichte intended to achieve in

¹ Hans Kohn, 'The Paradox of Fichte's Nationalism', *Journal of History of Ideas*, 10 (3) (1949), pp. 319–43.

² George Armstrong Kelly, 'Introduction' to *Johann Gottlieb Fichte: Addresses to the German Nation*, ed. George Armstrong Kelly, trans. R.F. Jones and G.H. Turnbull (New York, 1968).

³ Xavier Leon, *Fichte et son temps*, Vol. II, 2 (Paris, 1927), p. 119; cited in Arash Abizadeh, 'Was Fichte an Ethnic Nationalist? On Cultural Nationalism and its Doubt', *History of Political Thought*, 26 (2) (2005), pp. 334–59.

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those lectures and how he conceived of their relation to his other works. I am certain that their first full translation into English since 1922 by Cambridge University Press, supplemented by the valuable editorial work of Gregory Moore, will make a tremendous contribution to the further advancement of scholarship in this field.

While I do not intend to discourage any interpretive claim or debate, I would like to caution against a certain anachronistic tendency that sometimes seems to sway the literature on the *Addresses*, namely, the tendency to hastily associate Fichte's views there with twentieth-century National Socialism. There cannot be anything wrong with exploring the role of Fichte's ideas in the making of Nazi ideology, but it is essential in so doing not to overlook those aspects of the *Addresses* that may not be serviceable to that ideology. What I have in mind are portrayals of Fichte's views in the *Addresses* which contend that Fichte (i) was an utter isolationist in his account of national identity, and (ii) he put forward nothing but the argument that the German nation is inevitably the 'sole' possible agent of true freedom in the world. Fichte's rhetoric throughout the *Addresses* may be somewhat responsible for this impression, but there is enough in those lectures that defy such reductionist reading. Below are some suggestions that may help in responding to such an interpretation.

Throughout the *Addresses* Fichte warns against what he calls 'foreignism' which can manifest itself in a variety of ways in social and personal life. Foreignism is a kind of cognitive or volitional sluggishness in governing one's own affairs, where there is constant need of an external source or standard of guidance, i.e. having a 'dependent mind' (p. 80). Fichte also associates foreignism with a propensity to believe in something 'final, fixed and immutably permanent' (p. 86), i.e. something one would not need to reflect upon or decide. For Fichte a paradigmatic case of foreignism is the use of concepts from a 'dead' language such as classical Latin, without knowing their original purported meanings, the contexts in which they were formed and the 'sphere of intuitions' in which they were embedded. Here foreignism does not consist of the fact that these concepts come from another language, but that linguistic practice is thus reduced to unreflective delivery of expressions over which one has no control (p. 54). This does not mean that it is impossible to grasp the true meaning of 'foreign' concepts; 'through diligence' one can 'penetrate' an old language and 'inject life into' its concepts by trying to use them in their 'primitive and unchanged' form (p. 69). Still, this would be an inherently 'interpretive' and therefore 'submissive' linguistic practice rather than a truly free, creative or 'original' one.

An 'original' linguistic practice would not treat the concepts of other languages, including the 'dead' ones, as already finished products to be properly grasped and used, but only as sources of 'stimulus' for self-activity, namely as things one can learn from to invent new concepts or meanings relating to the

constantly changing social environment (pp. 65, 81, 85). Such practice, Fichte explains, allows the use of words of another language so long as they are redefined and integrated into the 'system' of intuitions, designations and symbols that relate to the 'actual experience' of the community at stake (pp. 53–4, 73–5). Fichte considers 'idea', 'philosophy' and 'republic' as examples of words that have been properly incorporated into German.

For Fichte such linguistic borrowings are not just inevitable, as linguistic communities move about and 'mingle' with one another (p. 49), but also essential for the cultural as well as linguistic advancement of groups:

Between peoples there takes place an interaction of their culture and education, which is highly beneficial for the development of humanity in general, and an interpenetration, where each, with the good will of the other, nevertheless remains identical to itself. (p.175)

Thus it is not accidental for Fichte that Germans have developed a number of their shared distinctive qualities by interacting with other groups, such as commitment to independence or self-government (pp. 109–10) and belief in the immortality of the soul (pp. 73–7, 105). This means that Fichte is not only far from being an isolationist in his account of nationhood but also believes in the essential variability of human freedom:

Spiritual nature was able to represent the essence of humanity only in highly manifold gradations of individuals and of individuality in general of peoples. (pp. 171–2)

Passages such as these may also help us to understand why Fichte was an opponent of universal monarchy and colonialism in its cultural as well as economic forms (pp. 171–3).⁴

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⁴ See also Johann Gottlieb Fichte, 'Der Geschloßne Handelsstaat' (1800), in *Ausgewählte Politische Schriften*, ed. Zwi Batscha and Richard Saage (Frankfurt aM, 1977), p. 64, and *Die Grundzüge des gegenwärtigen Zeitalters* (1804–5), ed. I.H. Fichte, *Sämmlische Werke* Vol. 3 (Berlin, 1971), pp. 204–5.