

Egbert Klautke, *The Mind of the Nation: Völkerpsychologie in Germany, 1851-1955* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013)

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Today, *Völkerpsychologie* appears as an outdated aberration from scientific objectivity, and an example of bad science from a time when scholars used immature methods to chase an ominous *Volksggeist* (“folk spirit”), and eventu-

ally came up with nothing but political propaganda thinly veiled in the vocabulary of social science. In particular, it is the legacy of National Socialism that weighs heavily on our reception of *Völkerpsychologie*, having discredited the underlying concept of *Volk* and most of the compound words containing it, as well as the essentialist idea of national or ethnic characteristics or the “mind of the nation.” The notion *Volk* may also be one of the reasons why the reception of *Völkerpsychologie*, then and now, was difficult in the non-German-speaking world—the translation “folk psychology” is awkward at least, and this problem extends from the designation of the discipline itself to many of its key concepts.

The intellectual historian Egbert Klautke (University College London, School of Slavonic & East European Studies) has now published a thin book of less than two hundred pages that promises to be the first comprehensive study on the entire history of *Völkerpsychologie*, spanning from its “invention” in 1851 to its final demise in 1955. Moreover, Klautke does not content himself with unearthing the fascinating history of a semi-forgotten discipline, but calls for a fundamental reevaluation of its current reception, claiming that historians have largely misunderstood the original aims and objectives of its proponents. Although it has since been ignored or written off as pseudo-science, he argues, the modern social sciences owe a lot more to *Völkerpsychologie* than has usually been acknowledged.

Without doubt, Klautke presents some strong arguments for why one should take a closer look at *Völkerpsychologie*. Not only did its “invention” in the mid nineteenth century occur at the intersection of two of the most relevant intellectual, cultural, and political currents of this period—the rise of the modern sciences, and the increasing importance of a German national movement. At the same time, Klautke repeatedly stresses, *Völkerpsychologie* was also one of the academic roots of the modern social sciences. Indeed, many ideas and approaches that later became incorporated by sociology and anthropology were first introduced by representatives of *Völkerpsychologie*, and were then taken up by eminent scholars such as Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), Franz Boas (1858-1942), Martin Buber (1878-1965), Georg Simmel (1858-1918), and Werner Sombart (1863-1941). To make the history of *Völkerpsychologie* even more relevant, Klautke claims a direct connection between *Völkerpsychologie* and present-day sociology, cultural anthropology, cultural studies, and such widely used concepts as “national identity” and “national mentality.”

To write the comprehensive history of a scientific discipline and to keep it concise, readable, and focused is certainly always a challenge—even more so when this history spans more than a century and is presented on little

more than 150 pages of text. Klautke has found a solution to this problem that is both elegant and convincing. In three chapters, he examines the protagonists of three ensuing generations of *Völkerpsychologie*, situating them in their historical context and discussing the national and international reception of their ideas.

Klautke's point of departure is Moritz Lazarus's (1824-1903) and Heymann Steinthal's (1823-1899) idea of *Völkerpsychologie* as a discipline in the second half of the 1850s. Unlike their intellectual predecessors, Lazarus and Steinthal attempted to establish a new scientific discipline devoted entirely to the study of an assumed "folk spirit" (*Volksgeist*) as a driving force of history. As such a discipline would touch on all areas of individual and collective life, its scope, Klautke stresses, was—in theory at least—"universal, all-encompassing and without limits" (18). Throughout the first chapter, Klautke argues against the reproach that *Völkerpsychologie* was racism in the guise of a social science. The exact opposite was the case, he claims. As liberal scholars, Lazarus and Steinthal had advocated an understanding of the *Volk* based not on biological essence, but instead on the subjective view of its members. At the same time, however, Lazarus's and Steinthal's *Völkerpsychologie* was not only intended to empirically study the *Volksgeist*, but was also to serve a practical, national-pedagogical function, strengthening and reassuring the Germans' national consciousness. While these ideas can be understood in the context of aspirations for German unification in the 1850s and 1860s, *Völkerpsychologie* changed its direction against the background of the rise of antisemitism at the end of the 1870s. As a liberal reformist Jew, Lazarus stood up against Heinrich von Treitschke and like-minded scholars, using *Völkerpsychologie* to expound the Jewish *Volksgeist* and to defend it against antisemitic charges.

In the second chapter, Klautke turns to Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920), an eminent scholar in late nineteenth-century Germany and the "founding father" of experimental psychology. From the 1860s onwards, Wundt held an interest in topics such as language, myths, religion, and customs—an occupation that culminated in a monumental ten-tome study on *Völkerpsychologie* published between 1900 and 1920. Different from Lazarus and Steinthal, Wundt did not envisage his brand of *Völkerpsychologie* as a supreme discipline situated above other academic disciplines. In an increasingly crowded field of newly emerging and institutionalizing social sciences, he positioned *Völkerpsychologie* as the study of the history of human civilization, perceived as a teleological development from primitive stages to the modern *Kulturnationen* (cultural nations). Unlike Lazarus and Steinthal, Wundt was one of the "mandarins" of the German universities; his theories

were widely received and controversially discussed by many prominent scholars. The beginning of World War I then became a caesura for *Völkerpsychologie*, when Wundt—like many of his fellow intellectuals—tried to put his ideas into service for the German war effort. Whereas *Völkerpsychologie*'s view on different nations had—at least inside of Europe—been relatively universalistic, Wundt shifted the focus on the alleged differences between the “national characters” of Germany and those of its enemies. Klautke shows, however, that Wundt's *Völkerpsychologie* could not capitalize on the nationalistic postwar atmosphere of the Weimar Republic—and racial theories filled the gap instead.

Nonetheless, *Völkerpsychologie* experienced a noteworthy comeback during the Nazi period in the works of Willy Hellpach (1877-1955). Klautke's protagonist in the third chapter is certainly a most interesting figure. Trained as a psychologist and physician, Hellpach was a prolific and eclectic science writer. At the same time, he made a political career in the liberal German Democratic Party (DDP) during the Weimar years, serving as Minister of Education and State President of Baden, member of the Reichstag, and—unsuccessfully—ran for the Reich presidency in 1925. Hellpach's engagement with *Völkerpsychologie* only began after the Nazis' rise to power had brought an end to his political career. As Klautke accurately shows, Hellpach could then use *Völkerpsychologie* to reconcile himself with the Third Reich and to establish a safe niche for himself in academia.

Nevertheless, while Klautke's decision to rely almost entirely on the biographies of four scholars representing three generations of *Völkerpsychologie* allows the book to be well-focused and succinct, it is arguably here that its main problem lies. By sticking to scholars who described their own, eclectic and diverse approaches as *Völkerpsychologie*, the study seems to imply that it was something like a relatively well-defined discipline and that the different approaches bearing the name followed on each other in a rather linear way. As Klautke repeatedly stresses himself, this was clearly not the case. If the object of study were to be defined less by its designation, and more by its questions, topics, and intellectual approaches, the border of the overall narrative would probably get fuzzier, but it would allow to get a clearer picture of *Völkerpsychologie* in its context.

Another weakness is certainly that Klautke tends to oversell the relevance and timeliness of *Völkerpsychologie*, arguing that it was an important precursor of the modern social sciences, and that many present-day questions and concepts were first introduced by its representatives. This stressing of the groundbreaking qualities of *Völkerpsychologie* comes at a price. Not only does it imply that it was something like a relatively homoge-

neous, marked-out discipline; at the same time, this narrative leaves out much of the specificities of the different brands of *Völkerpsychologie* and, above all, makes it difficult to explain why three consecutive generations of scholars tried to introduce *Völkerpsychologie* as a label for their research—and all of them eventually failed. In any case, the topic would not need such puffery. Regardless of its eventual failure, *Völkerpsychologie* is a most rewarding and under-researched object of study. And the account in Klautke's book is, notwithstanding its shortness, far more nuanced and rich than some overemphasized assertions reflect.

That said, *The Mind of the Nation* is a well-written and compellingly constructed study on a topic that, until now, has been unjustly ignored. There are still many open questions, but any study that tries to answer them will have Klautke's book as an essential reference. In addition, it is a valuable and original contribution to the history of the human sciences from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, ranging from sociology and anthropology to the psy-disciplines.