

George L. Mosse, *The Culture of Western Europe The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Chicago, 2nd. edn., 1974)

These notes are based on Mosse's magisterial overview of the evolution of right-wing social and political ideas. These provide a background for the collecting and editing of the Brothers Grimm. Many ideas given theoretical expression during the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries re-appear in virulently practical form during the period of Nazi rule in 20<sup>th</sup> century Germany, as we shall see.

One key idea is the glorification of the peasant, important not just for the Grimms-- who tended to present their informants as simple country folk when they were in reality literate middle-and-upper-class people.

All quotes that follow are from Mosse's book: "The origins of romanticism lie within the age of reason itself. Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) foreshadowed many aspects of this mood. The idea of the 'natural man' which he popularized but which also existed in many other thinkers of the period emphasized that the individual was good and virtuous when removed from the fetters of civilization. In such an ideal state heart and head were unspoiled and therefore functioned properly. For Rousseau and other eighteenth-century thinkers this meant that humans were both reasonable and virtuous. However, the element of human reason in the state of nature played, for Rousseau, a lesser part than the goodness of the heart. This foreshadowed the romantic belief in the essential rightness and virtue of mankind's proper emotions when they were left to develop freely. The concept of natural man became a widespread fad in the eighteenth century; Louis XVI and his queen had a rural village built for themselves behind their palace of the Trianon where they could play at 'natural' man and wife. Moreover, this image was associated with rural life, the kind of Arcadia which writers had idealized for centuries. It should be kept in mind that the ideal of natural man associated with rural life was not only a background for the romantic movement, but also went into the making of one of the most important preconceptions of the nineteenth century, indeed of modern times: namely, that the peasant represents the greatest virtues in a society which is growing ever more industrial and urban." pp.14-15.

"Romanticism gave great impetus to nationalism. In this guise it could penetrate the politics of many divergent political parties. The connection between romanticism and nationalism is best illustrated in Germany where it was to dominate both politics and thought. It produced a type of romantic thought quite different from that which came about in France at the same time. The Frenchman Lamennais, who called himself an anti-materialist, placed the soul above the body of the individual and the soul of peoples above their material organization. With that, the Germans would have agreed. But from these premises Lamennais pleaded not for an exclusive national 'soul' nor for return to the vistas of a bygone age; instead, the superiority of the soul of a people meant to him the freedom of the individual spirit, the equality of the rights of each person, and the general fraternity of all peoples. Lamennais wrote in the tradition of Rousseau and of the Jacobins; there was no tradition which could lead to such thought in Germany. The stress in individual freedom which was inherent in romantic expression found an outlet in France and England which were both territorially united nations. But neither German Liberals nor German Romantics would ignore the national problem which their people faced. Germany had to be concerned with her own unity and independence, and those interested in German politics had little time to fight for the independence of others.

Any discussion of the impact of romanticism on German politics must begin with a literary movement. The Boys' Magic Horn (1806-8), a collection of folk ballads similar to Percy's *Reliques* in England, expressed in poetic form the feeling of a whole people. These ballads could be a means of historic self-identification in a nation which was divided and living under the shadow of French predominance. Like a similar collection made by Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803), these songs contained no judgment of the superiority of one people's emotional make-up over another; however, the German element was coming to the fore.

Grimm's *Fairy Tales* (1812-14) provided a good example of this new feeling. The brothers Grimm thought at first of their fairy tales as mere extensions of the kind of work which Arnim and Brentano had tried to do in the *Boys' Magic Horn*. Nevertheless, by 1812 they began to invest their tales with a definite national purpose. The Grimm brothers now saw in these simple tales a continuation of the old and glorious German epics, especially the *Nibelungenlied*. Their work began to symbolize the continuity of German history and became a reminder of a more glorious past rather than the present Napoleonic occupation. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, an old Hessian folk tale, symbolized in the Grimm brothers' eyes the goddess *Snaefried* over whose coffin *Haraldur* had held his vigil. The hunter who appeared in several of the fairy tales was nothing but a reincarnation of the ancient German hero *Siegfried*. The deeper significance of their interpretation lay in the fact that the Grimm brothers saw the symbolism which they had created as proof that these folk tales were a genuine and spontaneous tradition which was uniquely German. It was only a step to hold that such folk memories were most typical, because they were an uninterrupted flow of the national genius and that those who did not share them were foreigners who must be excluded. It was Friedrich von Schlegel (1772-1829) who gave clear expression to the national implications of such ideas. He claimed that national memories, which he equated with the spirit or poetry of a people, were the key to historic survival. Only those peoples who have 'great national memories' have survived in history. History is the selfconsciousness of a nation. Self-consciousness in Germany was defined as the folk spirit, as shared national memories, and as poetry. [...] As part of the romantic mood, the French Revolution appealed to those who wanted freedom. The question arose in many of the best minds at the beginning of the century of how national self-consciousness, defined in romantic terms, could be combined with the longing for freedom. How could the individual retain individualism and yet be integrated with the historic Volk? Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) illustrated what was happening to this plagued generation. Though the idea of freedom never left him throughout his life, he also desired to see in people a perfect unity of thought and action, for it seemed to him that the eighteenth century had created a gap between thought and action which had to be closed. He saw a dichotomy between what people wanted and what they achieved, not only in the eighteenth century philosophies but also in the French Revolution. He had welcomed the Revolution with high hopes and had defended the manifestoes of the Revolutionaries, only to see that Revolution turn into oppression in his native land. Analyzing his ideal and looking at the actuality around him, he came to the conclusion that self-realization was possible only through unity and integration.

Fichte then began to call for 'culture toward freedom' which could unite in a complete fashion human will and reason, human action and thought. In making his call, however,

he found that he had to redefine the idea of freedom itself. His famous Speeches to the German Nation of 1807-8 gave that redefinition even while Berlin, where he was speaking, was under French domination. He stated that unity of thought and action could be achieved only within that nation which was a valid historic community, defined in terms of the literary movement discussed. Within the unity of this community, the highest individual freedom could be found, not the individualized freedom of sentiment and emotion but the freedom found through group integration. This group was defined in the terms of the Volk. People had to be integrated with the national memories and the poetry of the Volk. Since he defined freedom as integration into the Volk memories, Fichte had to deny that other nations could form a valid group as a basis for freedom because he claimed that only the Germans had true national memories, 'only the German has character.' Fichte came to the conclusion that individuals must be cemented into the national group through education which would obliterate the individual will of the student and integrate it into a higher loyalty and freedom. No class of the population could stand apart from this process of integration. He rejected the whole idea of a class structure and even praised the simple medieval economic system." pp.38-41.

"[...] even a devoted Liberal like Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) came, in the end, to the conclusion that 'there are only two realities, God and the nation.' At first he tried to combine individualism with a confrontation of the national problem as Fichte had done, but he too, came to the realization that 'man is nothing by himself except through the force of the whole with which he tries to fuse himself.'" Such romanticism swept before it the older cosmopolitan and humanitarian ideas of the last century. The old Goethe, who still proclaimed such sentiments and who derided the new nationalism, was as isolated a figure in Weimar as, a century later, the old Benedetto Croce was to be an isolated figure in the new Italy. His concept of liberal freedom was as outdated then, so it seemed, as Goethe's was after the German wars of liberation against the French.

Friedrich Ludwig Jahn was the wave of the future. His book *Volksturm* (1810) glorified the German Volk who represented the whole of humanity and whose task it was to civilize the world by force. But the Volk must keep itself pure and undefiled as a race; Rome had fallen because races had mixed. Here already we can see the leanings of this glorification of the Volk toward an explicit racism. The state formed by the Volk would be democratic--Jahn as yet kept representative institutions and did not push the mystical unity of the Volk to the point where it superseded all representative forms of government. [Later on, the Nazis were to do precisely this: the essential ideas which lay behind the totalitarian position were in place by 1825].

The 'force of the whole' was the German nation singled out by God as the only valid Volk. Jahn organized the Turnerschaft to keep the people fit for the war that was coming. Significantly, the word *turnen* came from the medieval tournaments, but gymnastics were practical tasks to enable young men to be the soldiers of tomorrow. From their founding (1811) these Turnerschaften became centres of German nationalism; so did the Burschenschaften which Jahn was also instrumental in founding (1815). Students were united in them irrespective of their province or social class. Non-Germans, like the Jews, were excluded from the fraternities. These became instruments for German unity, meeting at the Wartburg in Thuringia, the constant symbol of a glorious German past. Here Luther had worked and here the old Minnesänger had held their festivals of song. Wagner was to put this spirit on the stage in his *Die Meistersinger von Nuernberg* and in

Tanhäuser as well. This romantic nationalism was directed, above all, against France which had so recently occupied the country. Jahn's diatribes against that nation were violent, just as Wagner later castigated French perfidy in the last lines of the *Meistersinger*. This nationalism, then, was inspired by the romantic movement. It was 'total' in the sense that it was not concerned with boundaries or even with blueprints for a government, but with 'culture' as a whole. Jahn dressed his Turners in uniforms representing an age long past, symbolizing the organic Volk which has its own and superior way of life.

This nationalism is often described by the term of 'cultural nationalism.' There is much truth in that description, for it did hold that a nation was great if it was culturally supreme. But the word culture was, in this particular instance, infused with romantic meaning. It was the 'German spirit' with which integration was demanded, and that spirit transcended any kind of political and economic reality. In France and England this was unnecessary because both had a very tangible and glorious immediate past but disunited Germany had experienced nothing but political disappointments: the Thirty Years' War, the French domination, the rejection of national aspirations at the Congress of Vienna, and their suppression by the reaction. In political terms, Germany had a history of failure of which the German Romantics were conscious. Furthermore, Germany was also industrially backward. By mid-century the city of London used more coal than the whole of Germany combined. This impotence was reflected in the German romantic stress upon the spirit and in Wagner's statement at the end of the century that the 'German' is more interested in conserving than in gaining—"the newly acquired has only value for him when it embellishes the old." Wagner also put Siegfried on the stage to herald a new day for his people, but typically enough, a new day linked to the old.

This has been worth elucidating in some detail, for through this romantic impetus German nationalism got its particular coloring. The irrationalism which was to accompany its most important modern expression in National Socialism had deep roots..." pp.42-44

[...Much follows, in this long and fascinating book which traces the evolution of the ideas noted here through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries until they emerged in full-blown political form in the Fascist movements of Italy and Germany]

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