Introduction

Völkerpsychologie in Germany

Völkerpsychologie, or folk psychology, reflected some of the main currents within German academia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its champions attempted to synthesize the empirical knowledge about the history and development of civilization that had been accumulated during the nineteenth century, and tried to construct an academic discipline that would reflect the rapid political, economic and cultural changes of their contemporary society, and explain these in a comprehensive way. The success of the sciences provided an irresistible model for such an enterprise, as did the national movement in Prussia and the subsequent founding of a unified German nation state under Prussian auspices. The optimism and the belief in progress that characterized liberal thinking in the nineteenth century underpinned the 'project' of folk psychology.

Today the original aims of the 'founders' of Völkerpsychologie have been thoroughly forgotten. Instead, the term is widely associated with simplistic prejudices and stereotypes that might be common amongst journalists and political propagandists, but unworthy of serious academic contributions. Historians and literary critics easily dismiss folk psychology as a pseudo-science that presented speculations about 'national characters' as serious scholarship. They see folk psychology as an example of the perversion of science for political reasons, and treat it as little more than a chapter of the abuse of scholarship for political purposes. Thus, the contribution of folk psychology to the history of the social sciences has been regularly underestimated or even ignored. Similarly, Völkerpsychologie has not been included in the pedigree of the social sciences, and has rarely been studied in detail. The original aims and objectives of its proponents have thus been frequently misunderstood. Often, authors have followed the verdict of the social anthropologist Wilhelm Emil Mühlmann (1904–88), who, when writing the history of his own discipline, dismissed Wilhelm Wundt's Völkerpsychologie as an overambitious concept,

which was conceptually flawed and thus deserved to be forgotten: 'Völkerpsychologie did not deal with peoples, and was no psychology either.'2

The following study tries to correct the commonly held view that folk psychology was little more than political propaganda dressed up as a social science. It will present it as part of the wide-ranging debates that led to the formation of the social sciences, and follow the history of Völkerpsychologie in Germany from its beginnings in the 1850s to the 1950s. In order to cover such an extended period of time in a concise study, the focus will be on the main representatives of folk psychology, i.e., those authors who actively promoted and advertised it as a discipline. The first chapter will introduce the folk psychology of the philosopher Moritz Lazarus (1824-1903) and the linguist Heymann Steinthal (1823-99), who founded a specialized journal, the Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft (ZfVS), to promote and establish their version of folk psychology. Lazarus and Steinthal were succeeded by the psychologist and philosopher Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920), who published a massive ten-volume study on Völkerpsychologie from 1900 to 1920, the most detailed and comprehensive contribution to the field. As the best-known folk psychologist, Wundt will be the focus of the second chapter. In the 1930s the psychologist, journalist and politician Willy Hellpach (1877–1955), a former student of Wundt, revived the by then ailing approach when he published the only textbook on Völkerpsychologie, in an effort to accommodate himself within the Third Reich. Hellpach remained a dedicated folk psychologist until his death, personifying both the continuity and the demise of folk psychology after the Second World War. All three chapters will provide the necessary biographical background of the different generations of folk psychologists, introduce their approaches to the field, and look at the reception and appropriation of their folk psychology.

Such a careful reconstruction and contextualization will show that, even though the sometimes grandiose plans and expectations attached to folk psychology attracted severe criticism from the outset, folk psychology left its mark on the intellectual landscape of turn-of-the century Germany, as well as abroad, particularly in France, the United States, Eastern Europe and Russia. Central concepts of Völkerpsychologie were incorporated by sociologists, cultural and social anthropologists, and representatives of Volkskunde - all disciplines which, in contrast to folk psychology, became subsequently established at university level during the twentieth century. Even though folk psychology failed in this respect, questions posed and problems formulated by early folk psychologists have thus remained on the agenda of the humanities and the social sciences until the present day. Many of the questions and ideas that are nowadays associated with disciplines such as sociology, cultural anthropology and cultural studies were first raised by the representatives of folk psychology. The list of scholars who benefitted from the insights of folk psychology reads

like a 'who's who' of the early social sciences: Ernest Renan (1823–92), Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), Martin Buber (1878-1965), Franz Boas (1858-1942) Georg Simmel (1858-1918) and Werner Sombart (1863-1941) were among those who were heavily influenced by Lazarus, Steinthal and Wundt, although they did not always acknowledge these intellectual debts. Renan's famous 'voluntaristic' definition of the nation, for instance, was based on a notion that was very similar to Lazarus's definition of the 'folk'; Simmel's pioneering works on cultural sociology were based around central concepts of the folk psychology of his teachers Lazarus and Steinthal; central pillars of Durkheim's sociology - 'social facts' and 'collective representations' - owed much to his reading of Wundt's Völkerpsychologie. Moreover, current concepts such as 'national identity' or 'national mentality' can be traced back to the debates about folk psychology and are directly related to the central concept of folk psychology, the idea of a unique 'folk spirit' or 'folk soul'.

When Moritz Lazarus coined the phrase Völkerpsychologie in 1851, he did not do so in an intellectual vacuum. Attempts to characterize other nations or peoples were then hardly new; indeed, some authors could easily trace the 'othering' of foreign nations back to the earliest records of history. Herodotus and Thucydides have thus been identified as the 'first folk psychologists', since the thinking of classical Greek philosophy depended on the asymmetrical basic concepts of 'Greeks' and 'barbarians'. The idea of a 'national character', closely related to any version of folk psychology, became an integral part of Enlightenment philosophy, and was hence as common in Germany as in other European countries by the mid nineteenth century. The list of authors who wrote on 'national character' includes some of the most famous European philosophers: Giambattista Vico's (1668-1744) Scienza Nuova, the first attempt to establish a 'social science' in modern times, took the 'common nature of peoples' as its starting point. 4 Montesquieu's (1689–1755) Esprit des lois was based around the concept of national character, and Voltaire (1694-1778) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) followed him in this way.⁵ Auguste Comte's (1798–1857) Sociologie did not differ in this respect.⁶ David Hume (1711–76) wrote a short essay, 'On National Characteristics', in which he refuted popular anthropological theories of the eighteenth century that explained the peculiarities of nations as the result of the climate and natural living conditions. As part of his *System of Logic*, John Stuart Mill (1806–73) had outlined a 'political ethology' or 'science of national character' that was to form the centre of a future social science. Indeed, Heymann Steinthal considered this the most accurate English translation of the German term Völkerpsychologie.8 In Germany, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) had used the concept of an irreducible 'folk spirit' to counter the universal individualism of the Enlightenment philosophers. For him, the spirit of a people manifested itself in its culture, i.e. its language, customs, and mores; history

represented the continuous development of individually different, but structurally similar nations which together formed a harmonic and pluralist universe.9 Lazarus and Steinthal were well aware of this venerable tradition. In particular, they were heavily indebted to Herder and shared his belief in national progress as much as the assumption of a harmonic plurality of the different nations that constituted mankind. Their Völkerpsychologie can be seen as an attempt to continue the Herderian tradition and make it compatible with the modern, 'scientific' age.

In contrast to older traditions, then, Lazarus and Steinthal's aim was to build a new discipline that did not only incorporate a notion of 'national characters', but would be exclusively devoted to the study of the 'folk spirit' (Volksgeist). To them, the folk spirit was not only an important aspect of history, but its driving force. A complete and adequate understanding of the folk spirit would explain the historical development of mankind in its entirety. With hindsight, Völkerpsychologie as conceived by Lazarus and Steinthal in the mid nineteenth century appears as a quintessentially modern discipline, despite the archaic terminology they employed. 10 The core ideas of liberalism were fused in their concept of folk psychology: the belief in the primordial importance of the nation was combined with an admiration for the methodological rigour of the sciences. These notions were merged with the idea of universal progress, both material and moral, which was informed not only by philosophical study, but by their personal experience of Jewish emancipation, which coincided with their identification with Prussian and German culture and society.

A comprehensive history of Völkerpsychologie – in particular, a study that follows the reception and impact of this concept, and positions it in its historical context - has not been available yet.11 This study will fill this gap, drawing on a wide range of original literature and specialized studies, which contain the scattered information on the representatives of German folk psychology, their readers, followers and critics. Lazarus and Steinthal have first and foremost attracted attention for their role in the Jewish reform movement in Germany, and as typical representatives of German-Jewish intellectuals in the nineteenth century. Their political-social views and personal experiences have thus been more thoroughly studied than their academic work.¹² More recently, however, their folk psychology has received increased attention. Lazarus in particular has been discovered as a forerunner of contemporary philosophy of culture, while the importance of Steinthal's linguistic works has been duly acknowledged.¹³ In fact, their political-social views cannot and should not be separated from their academic work: the first chapter of this study will show how the idea of 'folk psychology' was intricately, and increasingly, related to Lazarus and Steinthal's Jewish experiences.¹⁴

Despite Wilhelm Wundt's standing and fame as one of the founders of modern psychology, his *Völkerpsychologie* has only received scant attention.¹⁵ Only a few biographical studies on Wilhelm Wundt exist, none of which pays tribute to his role in German academia between the 1870s and 1920.16 A full-scale academic biography of Wundt, along the lines of recent studies of other outstanding scholars such as Theodor Mommsen (1817-1903), Rudolf Virchow (1821-1902), Werner Sombart and Max Weber (1864-1920), which would look at this liberal mandarin as a typical personality of Imperial Germany, remains a desideratum.¹⁷ In general historical literature, Wundt rarely makes an appearance, and in the few cases that exist, he is often misrepresented.¹⁸ Knowledge of Wundt's personality and of his academic work, and in particular his Völkerpsychologie, has largely been restricted to historians of psychology, who have studied his contributions to the field from their particular vantage point i.e., the formation of psychology as an independent discipline, with a focus on the 'emancipation' of psychology from philosophy and its transformation into a scientific, experimental discipline. Wundt's Völkerpsychologie, in which he followed the traditional, hermeneutic methods of the humanities, did not fit into this 'grand narrative' of the history of psychology as a natural science, and has thus received limited attention. While there have been attempts to rehabilitate Wundt's folk psychology as an original version of contemporary cultural psychology, its historical context and impact have remained underexplored.¹⁹

Willy Hellpach's huge academic œuvre is largely forgotten today. Even authors who are more sympathetic towards folk psychology than the majority of intellectual historians have overlooked his contributions to the field, despite the fact that he was the author of the only textbook on Völkerpsychologie, which enjoyed considerable success and was reprinted three times during his lifetime, both during and after the Third Reich.²⁰ The only two specialized studies that focus on Hellpach's folk psychology present it as a shrewd attempt to criticize National Socialist ideology by using 'coded language'. A close reading and contextualization of Hellpach's folk psychology, however, reveals that such a sympathetic interpretation is not tenable.²¹ Due to the wide coverage of his publications and the range of his interests, Hellpach appears in diverse historical contexts in the academic literature. As a popular and popularizing author he was at his best, able to comment on topics as diverse as religious reform, prostitution as a social problem, the effects of weather on the human psyche, or the pitfalls of parliamentary democracy. For instance, he has served Joachim Radkau in his study of the 'age of nervousness' as a 'seismograph' of the history of Wilhelmine Germany, on account of his contributions to the debate on 'neurasthenia' before the First World War. Accurately, Radkau claims that due to his relentless eclecticism Hellpach missed the chance to become a great scientist, but was a 'medium of his time'. 22 His main strength was the popularization of scientific research, and his best works were syntheses and introductory textbooks for which he made good use of his dual qualification as a medical doctor and a psychologist. Best known for his political career and as a political commentator and journalist during the Weimar Republic, Hellpach's idiosyncratic political views have been discussed controversially. While Christian Jansen sees Hellpach as an 'anti-liberal democrat' who came close to the 'conservative revolution' and the 'völkisch movement' since he defined 'nations' (Völker) in an essentialist way as supraindividual and suprahistorical entities with their own specific character, a recent biographical study has defended Hellpach as a loyal democrat who stayed true to the principles of his party, the left-liberal DDP, even during the crisis of the Weimar Republic in the early 1930s. In this perspective, Hellpach is claimed for the democratic, anti-totalitarian tradition in Germany. While both these views have their merits, they remain too limited since they are not able to conceive Hellpach as a democratic politician whose views still overlapped to a large degree with the radical right in Germany, including Nazi ideology.²³ The third chapter in this study will show how Hellpach used folk psychology to accommodate himself within the Third Reich, and how easy it was for him to stick to his academic and political views after 1945.

The following study will follow the history of Völkerpsychologie from its 'invention' by Lazarus and Steinthal in the 1850s through to its ultimate demise in the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1950s. It will show that folk psychology needs to be taken seriously by intellectual historians because of the impact it had on the development of the humanities and the social sciences. In order to do so, ample room will be given to the reception of folk psychology, both within Germany and abroad. While there were only few active champions of folk psychology, it reached and influenced scholars and intellectuals that were or became much more famous than Lazarus, Steinthal, Wundt and Hellpach. All these champions of folk psychology hoped to find a way to study the 'mind of the nation' in an objective and academic way, and distanced themselves from political ideologies. This proved to be an impossible task: in each case discussed in the following study, political events intervened and changed folk psychology substantially. In the case of Lazarus and Steinthal, the growing anti-Semitism in of the 1870s and 1880s changed the meaning and direction of their folk psychology. The legacy of Wilhelm Wundt's folk psychology was determined by the First World War, and his contributions to the 'war of words' that accompanied it. Hellpach's folk psychology was his attempt to find an arrangement within the Third Reich; without the takeover of power by the Nazis, it would most certainly not have been written. Still, I will argue that despite the obvious problems in writing a purely academic and theoretical folk psychology that does not get entangled in political debates, the easy dismissal of folk psychology as little more than a political ideology is premature. The central problem that folk psychology addressed, namely the question of the nature or character of nations, has remained on the agenda of the humanities and social sciences, despite the apparent 'failure' of Völkerpsychologie as a discipline.

Note on Language

Writing on Völkerpsychologie in English poses specific problems of translation. It is almost impossible to translate the very term Völkerpsychologie accurately into English. The most literal translation, 'psychology of peoples', sounds particularly awkward and has never been used. Instead, since its introduction in the nineteenth century, the term has been rendered variously as 'folk psychology', 'ethnic psychology', 'ethnic anthropology', 'social psychology', or even 'race psychology'. All these possible translations - one could add 'national psychology' - do not quite catch the connotations of the German original and are thus more interpretations than translations. Importantly, all these options ignore the plural of Völker in the German original, which distinguished Völkerpsychologie from Volkskunde ('folklore') and implied the study of 'peoples' as nations, not the 'common people'. Historically, 'folk psychology' was chosen by the translator of Wilhelm Wundt's study Elemente der Völkerpsychologie, which earned him an angry comment from a British reviewer for the introduction of such a ghastly neologism. Furthermore, using the English term 'folk psychology' can lead to further misunderstandings since contemporary psychologists employ this term to describe lay-psychological reasoning, in contrast to academic psychology. Despite these problems, for pragmatic reasons, I will use 'folk psychology' in the following study. I do not imply that this is the best or most accurate translation, but will use it interchangeably with, and as a kind of placeholder for, the German Völkerpsychologie. The related terms Volksgeist and Volksseele will accordingly be rendered as 'folk spirit' and 'folk soul'. All composites that include the German term Volk or the adjective völkisch are potentially misleading in English translation; Volkstum creates even bigger problems and will be translated as 'nationhood'. Similarly, völkisch was a far more generic term before it became hijacked by the far-right and anti-Semitic völkisch movement. Despite this political use of the term, it should not, as has been done in a recent study on the Third Reich, be translated as 'racial' without any further explanation.²⁴

Notes

- 1. See for instance H.-U. Wehler, Nationalismus: Geschichte, Formen, Folgen (Munich, 2001), p. 7, who refers to Völkerpsychologie as an aberration. T. Nipperdey, Deutsche Geschichte 1866–1918. Band 1: Arbeitswelt und Bürgergeist (Munich, 1990), p. 631, sees Wundt's Völkerpsychologie as a 'failure'.
- 2. W.E. Mühlmann, Geschichte der Anthropologie, second edition (Frankfurt am Main and Bonn, 1968), p. 120: 'Die Völkerpsychologie hatte weder mit Völkern zu tun, noch war sie Psychologie.' Few authors have noted that this text, originally published in 1948, served a purpose in whitewashing German anthropology during the Third Reich, including Mühlmann's own contributions. In his Rassen- und Völkerkunde: Lebensprobleme der Rassen, Gesellschaften und Völker (Braunschweig, 1936), Mühlmann had devoted a substantial chapter to Rassenund Völkerpsychologie.
- E. Beuchelt, *Ideengeschichte der Völkerpsychologie* (Meisenheim am Glan, 1974); 3. more recently M. Cole, Cultural Psychology: A Once and Future Discipline (Cambridge, MA and London, 1996); see R. Koselleck, 'The Historical-Political Semantics of Asymmetric Counterconcepts', in idem, Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time, trans. K. Tribe (New York, 2004), pp. 155-91.
- G. Vico, Grundzüge einer neuen Wissenschaft über die gemeinschaftliche Natur der 4. Völker, trans. W.E. Weber (Leipzig, 1822).
- R. Romani, National Character and Public Spirit in Britain and France, 1750-5. 1914 (Cambridge, 2002).
- 6. C. Sganzini, Die Fortschritte der Völkerpsychologie von Lazarus bis Wundt (Bern, 1913), pp. 9–12, 21–24.
- D. Hume, 'On National Characteristics [1777]', in idem, Essays: Moral, Political 7. and Literary, ed. E.F. Miller (Indianapolis, n. d.), pp. 197-215.
- J.S. Mill, A System of Logic: Ratiocinative and Inductive [1843], vol. 2, seventh 8. edition (London, 1868), pp. 497-500; see H. Steinthal, Philologie, Geschichte und Psychologie in ihren gegenseitigen Beziehungen: Ein Vortrag gehalten in der Versammlung der Philologen zu Meissen 1863 (Berlin, 1864), p. 76.
- 9. J. Echternkamp, Der Aufstieg des deutschen Nationalismus, 1770–1840 (Frankfurt am Main, 1998), pp. 101-4; P. Zusi, "Kein abgefallenes Blatt ohn Wirkung geblieben": Organicism and Pluralism in Herder's Metaphorics of Culture', in Der frühe und der späte Herder: Kontinuität und/oder Korrektur, ed. S. Groß and G. Sauder (Heidelberg, 2007), pp. 89–97.
- Lazarus and Steinthal did not, however, as Helga Sprung has argued in an 10. attempt to include them in the pedigree of 'scientific' psychology, employ 'quasiexperimental' methods. Cf. H. Sprung, 'Hajm Steinthal (1823-1899) und Moritz Lazarus (1824–1903) und die Ursprünge der Völkerpsychologie in Berlin', in L. Sprung and W. Schönpflug, eds, Zur Geschichte der Psychologie in Berlin (Frankfurt am Main, 1992), pp. 83-96, at p. 88.
- Beuchelt, Ideengeschichte der Völkerpsychologie, is mainly interested in the school 11. of 'culture and personality', which combined cultural anthropology with Freudian theories.

- See in particular I. Belke, ed., Moritz Lazarus und Heymann Steinthal: Die 12. Begründer der Völkerpsychologie in ihren Briefen, 3 vols (Tübingen, 1971–1986).
- M. Lazarus, Grundzüge der Völkerpsychologie und Kulturwissenschaft, ed. C. 13. Köhnke (Hamburg, 2003); I. Kalmar, 'The Volkerpsychologie of Lazarus and Steinthal and the Modern Concept of Culture', in Journal of the History of Ideas 48 (1987), pp. 671-90. On Steinthal see C. Trautmann-Waller, Aux origines d'une science allemande de la culture: Linguistique et psychologie des peuples chez Heymann Steinthal (Paris, 2006); W. Bumann, Die Sprachtheorie Heymann Steinthals. Dargestellt im Zusammenhang mit seiner Theorie der Geisteswissenschaft (Meisenheim am Glan, 1966).
- See U. Jensen, Gebildete Doppelgänger: Bürgerliche Juden und Protestanten im 19. Jahrhundert (Göttingen, 2005); M. Bunzl, 'Völkerpsychologie and German-Jewish emancipation', in H.G. Penny and M. Bunzl, eds, Worldly Provincialism: German Anthropology in the Age of Empire (Ann Arbor, MI, 2003), pp. 47–85.
- C.M. Schneider, Wilhelm Wundts Völkerpsychologie. Entstehung und Entwicklung 15. eines in Vergessenheit geratenen, wissenschaftshistorisch relevanten Fachgebietes (Bonn, 1990); B. Oelze, Wilhelm Wundt: Die Konzeption der Völkerpsychologie (Münster, 1991). The most recent contribution by G. Jüttemann, ed., Wilhelm Wundts anderes Erbe. Ein Mißverständnis klärt sich auf (Göttingen, 2006), does not add to the exisiting knowledge of Wundt's Völkerpsychologie.
- See G. Lamberti, Wilhelm Maximilian Wundt (1832-1920): Werk und Persönlichkeit in Bildern und Texten (Bonn, 1995).
- See S. Rebenich, *Theodor Mommsen: Eine Biographie* (Munich, 2002); F. Lenger, 17. Werner Sombart, 1863-1941: Eine Biographie (Munich, 1994); C. Goschler, Rudolf Virchow: Mediziner, Anthropologe, Politiker (Cologne, 2002); J. Radkau, Max Weber: Die Leidenschaft des Denkens (Munich and Vienna, 2005).
- See for instance W.D. Smith, Politics and the Sciences of Culture in Germany, 1840-1920 (New York and Oxford, 1991), p. 127, who discusses Wundt in passing only.
- K. Danziger, Constructing the Subject: Historical Origins of Psychological Research 19. (Cambridge, MA, 1990); Cole, Cultural Psychology; R.W. Rieber, ed., Wilhelm Wundt and the Making of a Scientific Psychology (New York and London, 1980); J.D. Greenwood, 'Wundt, Völkerpsychologie, and Experimental Social Psychology', in *History of Psychology* 6 (2003), pp. 70–88.
- Schneider, Wundts Völkerpsychologie, mentions Hellpach in passing. He is excluded from G. Eckardt, ed., Völkerpsychologie: Versuch einer Neuentdeckung (Weinheim, 1997).
- H. Gundlach, 'Willy Hellpach; Attributionen', in C.F. Graumann, ed., Psychologie im Dritten Reich (Berlin, 1986), pp. 165-95; H. Gundlach, 'Willy Hellpachs Sozial- und Völkerpsychologie unter dem Aspekt der Auseinandersetzung mit der Rassenideologie', in C. Klingemann, ed., Rassenmythos und Sozialwissenschaften in Deutschland: Ein verdrängtes Kapitel sozialwissenschaftlicher Wirkungsgeschichte (Opladen, 1987), pp. 242-76. Gundlach's thesis is not convincing, as will be shown below. See also W. Stallmeister and H.E. Lück, 'Die Völkerpsychologie im Werk von Willy Hellpach', in Jüttemann, ed., Wilhelm Wundts anderes Erbe, pp. 116-27, and W.

- Stallmeister and H.E. Lück, eds, Willy Hellpach: Beiträge zu Werk und Biographie (Frankfurt am Main, 1991), which contains a bibliography of Hellpach's works.
- J. Radkau, Das Zeitalter der Nervosität: Deutschland zwischen Bismarck und 22. Hitler (Darmstadt, 1998), pp. 15.
- C. Jansen, 'Willy Hellpach. Ein antiliberaler Demokrat kommentiert den 23. Niedergang der Weimarer Republik', in W. Schmitz and C. Vollnhals, eds, Völkische Bewegung – Konservative Revolution – Nationalsozialismus: Aspekte einer politisierten Kultur (Dresden, 2005), pp. 210–26, at pp. 210, 217; see C. Jansen, Professoren und Politik: Politisches Denken und Handeln der Heidelberger Hochschullehrer, 1914–1935 (Göttingen, 1992); C.A. Kaune, Willy Hellpach (1877-1955): Biographie eines liberalen Politikers der Weimarer Republik (Frankfurt am Main, 2005). Tellingly, neither Jansen nor Kaune have studied Hellpach's folk psychology in detail.
- R.J. Evans, The Third Reich in Power, 1933-1939 (London, 2005). 24.