

***FROM VÖLKERPSYCHOLOGIE TO THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE***

Martin Kusch

University of Vienna  
Department of Philosophy  
Universitätsstrasse 7  
A-1090 Vienna  
Austria  
Email: martin.kusch@univie.ac.at

*Abstract*

This paper focuses on two developments in nineteenth-century (philosophy of) social science: Moritz Lazarus' and Heymann Steinthal's *Völkerpsychologie*, and Georg Simmel's early sociology of knowledge. The paper defends the following theses. First, Lazarus and Steinthal wavered between a "strong" and a "weak" programme for *Völkerpsychologie*. Ingredients for the strong programme included: methodological neutrality and symmetry; causal explanation of beliefs based on causal laws; a focus on groups, interests, tradition, culture, or materiality; determinism; and a self-referential model of social institutions. Second, elements of the weak programme were: the blurring of explanatory and normative interests; an emphasis on freedom of the will; anti-relativism and anti-materialism. Third, later research projects keeping the label "Völkerpsychologie" followed the *weak* programme. Fourth, in the 1880s and '90s, Simmel tried to build on some of the elements of the strong programme. Finally, and fifth, part of the explanation for why Simmel did not succeed in his attempt had to do with the social-political situation of German academia around 1900.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper focuses on two developments in nineteenth-century (philosophy of) social science that to-date have received scant attention from HOPOS-scholars: Moritz Lazarus' and Heymann Steinthal's *Völkerpsychologie*<sup>1</sup>, and Georg Simmel's early sociology of knowledge. I shall attempt to recapture why both bodies of work seemed original and provocative in their own days; what *völkerpsychological* motifs prepared the ground for Simmel's theorizing; and why the influence of both *Völkerpsychologie* and the young Simmel's radical position was limited.

I shall try to defend the following theses. First, Lazarus and Steinthal wavered between a "strong" and a "weak" programme for *Völkerpsychologie*.<sup>2</sup> Ingredients for the strong programme included: methodological neutrality and symmetry; causal explanation of beliefs based on causal laws; a focus on groups, interests, tradition, culture, or materiality; determinism; and a self-referential model of social institutions. I shall analyse key texts by Emil Wohlwill, Hermann Cohen, Wilhelm Windelband and Simmel, in order to establish the importance of the strong programme. Second, elements of the weak programme were: the blurring of explanatory and normative interests; an emphasis on freedom of the will; anti-relativism and anti-materialism. Third, later research projects keeping the label "Völkerpsychologie" followed the *weak* programme. Fourth, in the 1880s and '90s,

Simmel tried to build on some of the elements of the strong programme. Finally, and fifth, part of the explanation for why Simmel did not succeed in his attempt had to do with the social-political situation of German academia around 1900. I here follow Simmel's development to the point where he stops presenting his work as continuous with *Völkerpsychologie* and sociology.

As will be clear from the above, this paper presents a "big picture" or "bird's eye view" of a decades-long development. Concerning my theses this means that at best I can show them to be plausible or promising, and worthy of further investigation. Still, I hope to make clear that (as HOPOS-scholars) we ignore the tradition of *Völkerpsychologie* at our peril.

Previous research has not sufficiently brought out the epistemologically radical elements of Lazarus' and Steinthal's programmatic writings, or the intriguing fruits their programme engendered in the philosophical *cum* historical *cum* sociological analyses of authors such as Wohlwill, Cohen, Windelband, or Simmel. These *völkerpsychological* works were highly influential well into the twentieth century even if, for a variety of reasons--of which anti-Semitism clearly was one--they were seldom explicitly attributed to their original authors.

## **2. Lazarus' and Steinthal's *Völkerpsychologie***

### **§2.1 General<sup>3</sup>**

Lazarus (1824-1903) and Steinthal (1823-1899) spent most of their academic lives as *Extraordinarius* professors in Berlin--as Jews they could not get full professorial chairs. Lazarus was a philosopher, Steinthal a linguist with strong philosophical leanings. Their most important contribution to *Völkerpsychologie* was the *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* which appeared under their joint editorship between 1860 and 1890.

Lazarus' most influential book was *Das Leben der Seele* (1856, 1857, 1881). Two further monographs--*Der Prophet Jeremias* (1894) and *Die Ethik des Judenthums* (1898, 1911)--were expressions of Lazarus' eventual interest in Judaism. Steinthal's main studies in linguistics were *Die Sprachwissenschaft W. von Humboldts und die Hegel'sche Philosophie* (1848), *Grammatik, Logik, Psychologie* (1855), and *Abriss der Sprachwissenschaft* (1871, 1881). Later in life Steinthal too focused more on questions of ethics and religion publishing an *Allgemeine Ethik* in 1885, and *Zu Bibel und Religionsphilosophie* in 1890.

Lazarus and Steinthal were influenced by the philosophy of Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841) as well as the linguistics and anthropology of Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) and his brother Wilhelm (1767-1835). The central assumption of *Völkerpsychologie* was that humans typically live in diverse social "circles," of which the "Volk"--the ethnic community or nation--is the most important; hence the new form of psychology carried the term *Volk* in its title (1860, 5). Since there is no easy and straightforward translation of "Volk" into English, I shall stick to the German expression throughout.

As Lazarus and Steinthal made clear in their programmatic writings, *Völkerpsychologie* was meant to research topics such as: myths (1860, 44), religions (1860, 47), arts (1860, 53), legal systems (1860, 56), social strata, occupations and gender (1860, 58-60), the social distribution of knowledge (Lazarus 1851, 121-123), the rise and demise of *Völker* (1860, 67), "tools, machines, instruments, social institutions ... industrial products..." (Lazarus 1865a, 54-55), "crime statistics" (1865, 64), and "the influence of climate, [and] nutrition" (1860, 58).

## **§2.2 Elements of the "Strong Programme" of Völkerpsychologie**

I now turn to showing that the programmatic texts by Lazarus and Steinthal contained the material for two rather different programmes. I begin with the "strong programme."

Lazarus and Steinthal often stressed that *Völkerpsychologie* should discover causal psychological laws that explain historical developments (1860, 26). One such law was that in biology, psychology, and history ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny (Steinthal 1882, 183). The emphasis on laws and causation, at least for Steinthal, went together with determinism. For the historian, Steinthal wrote, "... persons are mere ... products of conditions and causes of subsequent effects." Freedom of the will thus played no role in the historians' work. (1869, 322) Steinthal's determinism was of a piece with atheism. He followed Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) in declaring that "*theology is anthropology.*" (1875a, 271) And he proudly declared: "*I ... have rejected ... God, immortality, and freedom*" (1877, 2).

Some of the contributions to the *Zeitschrift* had relativistic implications. For instance, Steinthal declared that "[the] objective yardstick for every individual is the larger whole to which he belongs" (1880, 215; cf. 1875a, 258-9). And Steinthal's disciple Gustav Glogau (1844-1895), a philosophy professor, wrote in 1877: "The world of the Greeks, the world of the Romans, the world of the monkeys and the world of the beetles are not the same world ..." (1877, 363) This theme--often supported with reference to Hermann von Helmholtz' physiology (1867, §26)--surfaced in a number of authors at the time, of which Auguste Comte was the most influential (Comte 1844, 13, 14, 43; cf. e.g. Gomperz 1896, 49-61). Steinthal also formulated what one might call a "methodological relativism" or "symmetry" principle, according to which true or false beliefs are to be explained on the basis of the same general mechanisms: "Psychologically speaking, belief (*Glaube*) does not differ from superstition (*Aberglaube*)" (1862, 97).

The proto-sociological and relativistic approach also played a role in the Lazarus' and Steinthal's reflections on language and institutions. Language was essentially social (1860, 31); languages were "as different as are the consciousness of different *Volksgeister*" [the

spirits of *Völker*] (1850: 63); language “contains the worldview of the *Volk* ...“ (1860, 42); and languages could not be clearly ranked as more or less developed (Steinthal 1850, 63). A *Volk* could not be defined of in terms of language, blood or soil; it was simply “a group of people who look upon themselves as a *Volk*; who count each other as members of the same *Volk*” (1860, 35).

The conceptions of the “compression” (*Verdichtung*) and “apperception” of “ideas” were the cornerstones of Lazarus’ and Steinthal’s theorizing. (These conceptions were further developments of Herbart’s philosophical psychology. Cf. von Graevenitz 1999.) The hypothesis underlying compression was that since consciousness is “narrow,” complex thoughts have to be compressed to survive and find a place. Compressed contents could exist in unconsciousness, language, institutions or material objects (Lazarus 1862, 57-58). In many of its uses in *Völkerpsychologie*, “compression” amounted to what today would be called “blackboxing.” Apperception was the conscious or unconscious interpretation of sensory or conceptual content in light of background beliefs (Steinthal 1860, 505). Apperception was always local and contingent (Lazarus 1865b, 403). Apperception was the psychological process resulting in metaphor and analogical reasoning, or what today is called “the theory-ladenness of observation” (Lazarus 1881, 16).

It was the central task of *Völkerpsychologie* to raise compressed or unconsciously apperceived contents back into consciousness. And yet, the historians or *völkerpsychologists* themselves too relied on compression and apperception. Indeed, historical knowledge was always dependent upon specific apperceptions of individual historians or the community (Lazarus 1865a, 16). And the same applied to philosophers (1872a, 9).

As Lazarus and Steinthal saw it, *Völkerpsychologie* constituted a challenge to traditional forms of epistemology. The central provocative claim in this context was that “objective spirit”--that is, language, institutions and tools--“is the form and organ through which the

individual interprets each and every part of nature.” For instance, even the “most elementary inquiry into nature” was shaped by tradition. Lazarus and Steinthal chastised Locke, Spinoza and Fichte for having missed this insight (1860, 67). Lazarus wanted to find “historical-psychological laws” of scientific development (1867, 482). And *Völkerpsychologie* should treat mathematics as “one element in the history of science and culture” and find “the causal links between these elements” (1865b, 412).

### §2.3 *Elements of a “Weak Programme” of Völkerpsychologie*

Turning from the strong to the weak programme of *Völkerpsychologie*, my thesis is not that these two programmes were ever presented as different, or held at different times by different or the same protagonists. My thesis is more moderate and cautious. I maintain that the texts written by Lazarus and Steinthal, as well as by some of their collaborators, contain elements that are not fully compatible with each other, or that were ambiguous. With hindsight we can recognize that these conflicting elements can be organized into two different programmes, one more radical, one more tame or weak. Organizing these elements in this way is what one might call a “rational reconstruction.” Such interpretative historiographical procedure is of course controversial, but I cannot defend it here.

I begin with anti-relativism. The linguist August Friedrich Pott (1802-87) warned in the very first year of the *Zeitschrift* against taking the *Volksgeist*-idea in the direction of a logical pluralism: “There is only one logic,” he declared (Pott 1860, 253-255). Moreover, above I briefly alluded to Lazarus’ call for a causal-explanatory study of the history of mathematics. But Lazarus also insisted that such study would not impinge on the validity of mathematics: “... every mathematical truth is a truth an und für sich, even before it was discovered” (1865b, 476). And at least by 1883 Steinthal was confident that “... all humans agree in their moral judgements” (1883, 289). The theologian Otto Flügel (1842-1914) agreed (1880, 469). For Flügel the differences between moral judgements by members of

different cultures were superficial and to be explained by different stages of development. Flügel presented these reflection as part of a critical discussion of the materialist Ludwig Büchner (1824-1899) and the cultural historian Friedrich Anton Heller von Hellwald (1842-1892). Both Büchner and von Hellwald had defended forms of moral relativism (Büchner 1857; von Hellwald 1875).

Anti-relativistic views can also be found in Steinthal's philological writings. Thus in 1864 Steinthal rejected Friedrich Max Müller's (1823-1900) claim that all languages are roughly equal in what they allow one to say and think (1867, 27). In response Steinthal distinguished between "historical", "pre-historical", and "non-historical people." A *Volk* with an Indo-European language was at least pre-historical, that is, in principle capable of "entering the historical stage." By contrast, speaking a Mongolian language left a *Volk* permanently non-historical (1864, 40). It fitted with this viewpoint that in 1867 Steinthal declared "Negro language" to be at a low stage of development (1867, XIV)

Lazarus and Steinthal seem to have disagreed at times over freedom versus determinism (Belke 1971a, 77-78). In a programmatic joint paper they left the issue to be decided by future research (1860, 23). Lazarus later distinguished between two forms of causation, mechanical and ideational. Ideational causation is "creation effected by ideas," "the highest form" of causation, and it "uses and controls mechanical causation" (1872b, 14). In the 1880s Steinthal adopted a related form of compatibilism: "... the extent of our ... freedom is the extent to which our ideas are determined by ethical ideals" (1885, 371).--As we shall see later, Simmel was unsatisfied with these ways of dodging the issue.

Steinthal's sympathies for deterministic views did not, however, lead him to see Auguste Comte (1798-1857) or Henry Thomas Buckle (1821-1862) as allies. Steinthal let it be known that "we have long since wiped Buckle's and Comte's wisdom from the soles of our shoes" (1868, 470; cf. 1877, 37). In a letter to Lazarus, Steinthal complained that Comte's



reductions of psychology to either brain physiology or rational history left no room for human choices (Belke 1971a, 266). Concerning Buckle's attempts to challenge freedom of the will with reference to moral statistics, Steinthal's attitude was equally dismissive (1864, 58).

Perhaps it was the "Antisemitismusstreit," triggered by Berlin historian Heinrich von Treitschke (1834-1896) in 1879 that led Lazarus and Steinthal to turn increasingly to a defence of the ethics and theology of Judaism. Lazarus eventually advocated *Völkerpsychologie* as a discipline created on the "basis of Judaism" (Klautke 2013, 648). And by 1885 the one-time self-declared atheist Steinthal was willing to adopt religion on the basis of ethical considerations (1885, 10). These new orientations changed the character of *Völkerpsychologie*. It was no longer primarily a causal-descriptive enterprise, but became the basis for normative theorizing. The "objective spirit" was no longer simply the sum total of collective thoughts, institutions and material objects: it now became "the place of the ideas and all truth, beauty and the good, the developed content of morality and humanity" (Steinthal 1885, 424). Steinthal used this conception to defend a form of socialism in which the state was the sole employer and everyone was paid according to their needs (1885, 265-279).

#### *§2.4 The Völkerpsychologie of Science: Wohlwill*

Up to this point I have focused on general programmatic statements by Lazarus, Steinthal and some of their closest allies. I now turn to three case-studies in *Völkerpsychologie* published in the *Zeitschrift*. I begin with a paper by Emil Wohlwill (1835-1912) on the history of chemistry. Wohlwill was a chemist and pursued his historical studies as something of a hobby. His investigation "The Discovery of Isomorphism" was published in the *Zeitschrift* in 1866. It concerned famous work by Eilhard Mitscherlich (1794-1863) in 1819.

Isomorphs are substances having the same crystal form but different composition. Their discovery was crucial for the development of a consistent system of atomic weights.

Wohlwill's paper has, over the years, been rediscovered at least three times. In 1972 Hans-Werner Schütt applauded Wohlwill's way of depicting the history of science "according to the image of a coral bank which becomes higher and bigger upon the foundations of dead elements" (1972, 282). Eight years later, Evan Melhado praised Wohlwill's efforts to portray Mitscherlich's discovery "... as immanent in antecedent developments" (1980, 88). More recently, Stefano Salvia situates Wohlwill in the proximity of Bruno Latour: for Wohlwill, Salvia writes, "... mineralogists, crystallographers, and chemists (...) became key nodes in an integrated, actor-network also composed of specimens, texts, contexts, and institutions ..." (2013, 282). I here want to highlight Wohlwill's debts to *Völkerpsychologie*. Schütt and Salvia are puzzled as to why Wohlwill published his work in the *Zeitschrift*. Probably both interpreters have overlooked the following footnote remark from another of Wohlwill's papers: "It hardly needs mentioning that I consider my work here and elsewhere as closely connected to [Lazarus'] *Völkerpsychologie*" (1863-64, 409). It is this debt to *Völkerpsychologie*, it seems to me, that sets Wohlwill apart from other historians of chemistry at the time (e.g. Kopp 1844, Rose 1864).

The *völkerpsychological* motifs of Wohlwill's study included: theory-ladenness of observation, opposition to the myth of the lone genius, interest in the community-response to anomalies, theories as tools and languages, scientific work as craftwork, distinguishing revolutionary and ordinary science, and interest in analogical reasoning. Concerning the theory-ladenness of observation, Wohlwill wrote: "Even if one were able to *begin* indifferently, still, even the first observations would be tied to beliefs; and these beliefs would be carried forward to further observations" (1866, 65). Wohlwill opposed the idea of the lone genius by emphasizing that Mitscherlich's discovery "was historically conditioned, the final element of the slowly developing train of thought ..." (1866, 37).

Regarding anomalies Wohlwill remarked that it often took chemists a long time before they recognized them as such (1866, 18). Berzelius' famous formulae were the "permanent compression of the new chemical insights concerning the possible combinations of elements" (1866, 25). They were a "tool" every "chemical artisan" could use even without a proper or detailed understanding of stoichiometry (1866, 26). This tool allowed for conducting science on the model of puzzle-solving: "The objective spirit of science had enriched so that it threw its light even upon the lesser undertakings to the side of the great scientific deeds" (1866, 27). "Even chemical language ... thinks for the members of its Volk ..." (1866, 28). Wohlwill also gave plenty of attention to the role of analogical reasoning: "Just like all other processes of coming to know, so also chemical knowledge-gathering was guided by analogy" (1866, 29). Examples included the division into acids, alkali and salts on the basis of their respective analogous functioning, or else the analogy between burning and calcification. Berzelius' formalism allowed for a much more systematic study of such analogies (1866, 29-31).

To underline the importance of Wohlwill's paper, Steinthal added a "Postscript" justifying the inclusion of Wohlwill's paper in the journal. Steinthal stressed that "we need a thorough understanding of the essence of natural science" since the natural sciences are the model for *Völkerpsychologie* (1866, 133). History of science was also important since it helped destroy the myth of the solitary scientific genius (1866, 134). Steinthal went on to suggest that the history and philosophy of science should be comparative (1866, 134). And he offered some initial suggestions concerning a comparison between chemistry (as presented by Wohlwill) and linguistics (as practiced by Steinthal himself). The most important parallel between the two fields of study, Steinthal thought, was the role of analogy (1866, 135-138).

Standing back from the details, it should be clear why Wohlwill felt indebted to the strong programme of *Völkerpsychologie*: his investigation is a community-centred, proto-

sociological, symmetrical, neutral and causal history of science, emphasizing anomalies, group responses, and interactions.

### ***§2.5 The Völkerpsychologie of God and Soul: Cohen***

My second example of a case study in *Völkerpsychologie* is from the young Herrmann Cohen (1842-1918)<sup>4</sup>: a paper entitled “Mythological Ideas of God and Soul, Psychologically Developed” (1868-69). Cohen claimed that the origins of scientific and metaphysical concepts needed to be understood historically-psychologically. Concerning god and soul, the key science was comparative mythology (1868-69, 397-9). Cohen suspected that the origins of these concepts could be found in associations surrounding the igniting of fire by rotating a wooden stick (1868-69, 401-3).

Probably *Urmenschen* had seen fires starting when one piece of wood was rubbed against another in a storm. Once *Urmenschen* understood the link between their fire and it being light, they could come to recognize the Sun as the central source of light (1868-69, 407-8). Lightening was now “apperceived” as a kind of fire; it linked together earthly and heavenly fires. It was sometimes called “a bird with golden wings” (1868-69, 409). Cohen suspected that initially *Urmenschen* had puzzled over the question who was rotating the fire-generating sticks in the clouds (1868-69, 413). For *Urmenschen* such cause “had to be” a person (1868-69, 432). The heavenly rotators were named after the effect of their actions: they were “the shiny ones” (1868-69, 416-28). Initially the gods--the rotators--differed from humans only quantitatively. With time however the quantitative difference turned into a qualitative difference (1868-69, 427). The further development of the god-idea was due to numerous “apperceptions and compressions” (1868-69, 433).

Finally, the act of procreation too was apperceived on the model of the rotating stick--the phallus--generating a spark (1868-69, 115). “Breaths of fire”--souls--deriving from

heavenly fire, were brought down to Earth by birds (of lightning). Cohen surmised that the idea lives on in the primitive idea according to which storks bring babies (1868-69, 117). The heavenly souls were deemed immortal. This immortality was due to a special drink, “mead,” prepared in heaven by rotating/stirring the clouds (1868-69, 130).

Stepping back from the details of Cohen’s lengthy investigation, it is not difficult to situate it with respect to strands of inquiry in Germany at the time. It obviously belonged within the “historical-critical” study of religion stemming from the Tübingen School of theology, that is, men like Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792-1860) or David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874). Cohen sought to fuse this tradition with *Völkerpsychologie* by insisting that not only theological but also scientific and philosophical concepts have to be rendered as contingent historical products, as the results of many and varied compressions and apperceptions. Again the analysis is symmetrical, methodologically relativistic, neutral, non-theological and causal: Cohen explains the origins of ideas and concepts without regard for their truth or theological significance today. This is again the strong rather than the weak programme.

### **§2.6 The *Völkerpsychologie* of Logic: Windelband**

My third case-study in *Völkerpsychologie* comes from the young Wilhelm Windelband (1848-1915): his paper “Epistemology from the Point of View of *Völkerpsychologie* (with Special Reference to Sigwart, *Logik I*)” (1875). Christoph von Sigwart (1830-1904) was of course one of the outstanding logicians at the time.

Windelband argued that logical laws come into being only once we become conscious of them (1875, 167). Moreover, logical compulsion was merely conditional: it tells us how we should reason if we are to achieve specific goals; logic was thus a “theory of art” (*Kunstlehre*) (1875, 168). Windelband sought to explain the semblance of absoluteness in psychological terms: since certain goals are highly salient to us all, we are tempted to treat

the logical tools for reaching these goals as essential for all reasoning (1875, 170). In general, Windelband insisted, logical laws had to be analysed as “compressions” of collectively sanctioned modes of reasoning (1875, 177). In this vein, Windelband explained the “law of non-contradiction” as a due to attempts to mediate social conflict (1875, 169). And the “principle of sufficient reason” had similar origins. It stemmed from debates within social groups on how to act. In that context it was naturally to say “you are right if you can prove it.” And the principle of sufficient reason was a constraint on how such “proofs” has to proceed. Windelband thus saw logic as part and parcel of a progress in conflict resolution (1875, 171).

As befitted Windelband’s *Kunstlehre*-conception--logic consists of reasoning-tools for reaching specific aims--logical form was for him closely intertwined with contents. He declared it to be a central concern of *Völkerpsychologie* to determine why specific *Völker* were more focused on either deduction or induction. He also suggested that the ancient Egyptians’ specific concerns with measurement inclined them towards deductive logic. And he observed that in the German logic of his time the central preoccupation was to study first and foremost mathematical reasoning (1875, 174).

Windelband’s paper ended on a sceptical note: von Helmholtz had pointed out that visual perceptions produced not “copies” but (at best) “symbols” of features of the world. Windelband suspected that something similar applied to logic: it helped humans cope in diverse environments, but it was no key to unlocking the secrets of the universe (1875, 178).

Such claims were of course radical--and very much in line with the “strong programme” of *Völkerpsychologie*. Although Windelband claimed to take his starting point from Sigwart’s logic, a more likely source was Buckle. After all, Buckle divided up cultures into those that obsessed about deduction, and those that focused on induction. Moreover, Windelband’s

*völkerpsychological* explanations of logical laws was clearly “psychologistic” by later standards (Frege 1884, Husserl 1900).

All of this was clearly too radical for Steinthal who added a “Postscript.” First, Steinthal rejected the evolutionary perspective of Windelband’s paper. For Steinthal Darwinism had little to contribute to an understanding of logic. Second, Windelband was wrong to suggest that the origins of logic lay in the need to find solutions to problems of coordination. Logic was due to “isolated” and “noble” thinkers who rejected their society. And third, Steinthal insisted that the goals for logic were not set by social contingencies but by metaphysical necessities (1875b, 186). Overall Steinthal’s intervention made clear that he did not wish to apply the “strong programme” to logic. It is hard to tell whether this caution was newly found when Steinthal encountered Windelband’s paper, or whether it had been there from the start.

### **§3. A Selection of Criticisms**

The history of the critical reception of *Völkerpsychologie* still remains to be written. Here I can offer only a few rough indications of the range of criticisms.

The linguist Ludwig Tobler (1827-1895) objected as early as 1861 that Lazarus’ and Steinthal’s view of the constitution of a *Volk* harboured a contradiction. In their Hegelian moments, the two *völkerpsychologists* suggested that “Volk is the first product of *Volksgeist*.” On other occasions they claimed that a *Volk* comes into being when a large number of individuals regard themselves and each other as a *Volk*. Tobler urged the adoption of the latter conception (1861, 264, 267). The linguist Hermann Paul (1846-1921) agreed, insisting that “all mental processes happen in individual minds only. ... Neither *Volksgeist* nor its elements have a concrete existence” (1880, 11). In a similar vein, the Austrian lawyer Ludwig Gumplowicz (1838-1909) believed that *Volksgeist* was just

Hegel's "absoluter Geist" resurrected (1883, 13-14). Tobler and Gumplowicz also felt the need to defend relativism against *Völkerpsychologie*. Tobler thought that *Völkerpsychologie* needed to accept the "relativity of all knowledge" in order to fulfil its potential (1861, 280). Gumplowicz agreed (1905, 285). But not everyone concurred with these relativistic and individualistic critics. Going in the opposite direction, Eduard von Hartmann (1842-1906) demanded that *Völkerpsychologie* work on the assumption of a "Gesamtgeist ... as the secret, unconscious connection between individuals" (1869, 518).

Wilhelm Dilthey objected to the assumption of natural-scientific laws of historical development. As Dilthey told Steinthal in 1860, when it comes to explaining historical events "the psychological laws ... are totally irrelevant" (Belke 1971a, 319). As the foundation of history and the human sciences, Dilthey envisaged a "descriptive" psychology instead of the "explanatory" form of psychology favoured by experimental psychology and *Völkerpsychologie*. And Dilthey lamented that *Völkerpsychologie* restricted history to "proving that well-known psychological laws apply to societal-historical events" (1860-80, 2). The sociologist and educationist Paul Barth (1858-1922) shared Dilthey's concern, claiming that in fact *Völkerpsychologie* had not succeeded in explaining a single event with the help of psychological laws (1922, 777).

The Viennese philosopher, sociologist and educationist, Wilhelm Jerusalem (1854-1923), complained that "*Völkerpsychologie* has achieved neither secure results nor fixed methods." The main culprit for Jerusalem was an exaggerated focus on language, ignoring that "modern ethnology studies primitive ideas and modes of thought independently of their linguistic dress." Jerusalem was also unhappy about the (alleged) fact that *Völkerpsychologie* treated "Völker as ... individuals-writ-large," and that it had too little to say about the ways in which individual human beings are "a product of social development" (1899, 209).



Still, Jerusalem continued the work begun by *Völkerpsychologie*. For instance, echoing Cohen, in his paper “Sociology of Knowledge,” Jerusalem called “God” and “soul” “social compressions of fantasy experiences” (1909, 143). Like Wohlwill so also Jerusalem insisted that “even scientific theories are in good part social compressions passed on by tradition ...” (1909, 144-45). And perhaps his remark that for “objective truth” to become “fixed and effective” it has to undergo “social compression,” owed something to Windelband (1909, 150). Although Jerusalem was not particularly original here, his writings constituted an important conduit between *Völkerpsychologie* and the next generation. For instance, when Ludwik Fleck’s (1896-1961) conceptualized scientific theories as “social compressions,” he was referencing Jerusalem’s paper (1935, 173). Simmel was another such conduit (Uebel 2012).

#### **§4. The Next Generation I: Wundt, Thurnwald, Hellpach**

Despite all the criticism of Lazarus’ and Steinthal’s version of *Völkerpsychologie*, the very term was subsequently adopted by a number of authors. I shall focus on three of them, and briefly consider to what extent they followed the “strong” or the “weak” programme.

Needless to say, Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) deserves to be mentioned first. After all, between 1900 and 1920 he published altogether ten single-authored volumes entitled “*Völkerpsychologie*.” The crucial differences between Leipzig and Berlin *Völkerpsychologie* were clear already after Wundt’s 1886-paper “Aims and Ways of *Völkerpsychologie*” (1886). Wundt felt that Lazarus and Steinthal were trying to do too much; *Völkerpsychologie* should be restricted to the study of universal elements “in the early stages of communal life,” namely “language, myth and customs.” Science, philosophy and art were rooted in these “early stages,” but their study demanded a different type of investigation. Science, philosophy and art were fields in which individuals, not

communities or *Völker*, played the decisive role (1886, 228). In so restricting the scope of *Völkerpsychologie*, Wundt gave up the essential elements of the strong programme.

The distinguished functionalist anthropologist Richard Thurnwald (1869-1954) in 1925 started a new *völkerpsychological* periodical: the *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Soziologie*. It was published (under that name) for just six years (1925-1931). In the programmatic first paper, “Problems of *Völkerpsychologie* and Sociology” (1925), Thurnwald claimed to be using “*Völkerpsychologie*” “similarly” to Steinthal and Lazarus. But he also emphasized that “the times have changed” (1925, 2). In particular there no longer was any need for concepts of “social super-souls” like “*Volksgeist*” (1925, 5), and philosophical speculation could now to be replaced by empirical work in biology and psychology (1925, 2). Thurnwald insisted that “the biological foundations of social-psychological processes must be foregrounded since the study of these facts and their interconnections are especially important in our field” (1925, 19). Thurnwald focused on “races” and “ethnic communities” on the one hand, and individual “personalities” on the other (1925, 8-9, 12-13). Races were the products of both inherited biological characteristics and environmental conditions like climate. Some of the environmental conditions could be altered by human technologies. This constituted “progress.” Thurnwald lamented that influential sociologists had neglected the role of individual personalities. He wanted to investigate how “personality types” were the products of nature and nurture, and how “ingenious great leaders” emerged (1925: 13). Having introduced race and personalities as his central categories, Thurnwald concluded his paper by discussing various forms of social “filtering processes” (1925: 14): these concerned conditions shaping processes of cultural interaction, e.g. the reception of “foreign cultural products” (1925: 16). Thurnwald emphasis on biology in *Völkerpsychologie* fitted with the fact that he was also the co-editor of *Archiv für Bevölkerungswissenschaft und Rassenhygiene*, the pre-eminent German journal for eugenics (Klautke 2013, 2630).

Thurnwald's newly defined *Völkerpsychologie* had little affinity with the strong programme: he focused on biology rather than sociology, and on the individual personality rather than social institutions. And his category of "progress" blurred normative and explanatory perspectives.

Although he stayed clear of full-blown antisemitism, Willy Hellpach in his 1938 book *Introduction to Völkerpsychologie* sought to make the field compatible with Nazi ideology (cf. Klautke 2013, Ch. 3). Hellpach had studied with Wundt and had worked as a psychiatrist and politician. The key problem for his *Völkerpsychologie* was to understand and explain the "*Volk*," or the "ethnic community," as the "natural form" or the (Goethean) "*Urphänomen*" of "hominid sociability" (1938, 1-2). The book consists of three parts: "*Volk* as natural fact," "*Volk* as formation of the spirit," and "*Volk* as creation of the will."

The first part focused on "ties of the blood:" family and race. Hellpach did not equate *Volk* and race--"*Volk* and race do never coincide anywhere on Earth" (1938: 36)--though he was happy to stress that "the race is extremely relevant for the constitution of a *Volk*" (1938: 35). Hellpach also discussed racial tensions both within an individual and between races, identifying "racial smells" as important triggers of hostilities between races (1938: 39). Hellpach also emphasized a close coupling between "*Boden und Blut*," that is, soil and race (1938: 48).

The second part of Hellpach's book, "*Volk* as formation of the spirit" focused on five "original goods"--"language, dress, tools, commands and conceptions of the beyond"--as well as on five "social orders of a *Volk*:" totemism, theocracy, political culture, enlightenment, and "*Volkstum*." "*Volkstum*" referred to the essence of a *Volk*. The best form of governance was based on such essential features. Finally, the third part, aimed for a better understanding of outstanding individuals: "rulers, organizers, inventors, priests, sculptors, poets, musicians, and magicians." While in some ways the products of their

respective *Völker*, these personalities in turn gave their *Völker* a cultural and political identity (1938: 144).

It goes of course without saying that *even if* Hellpach had had sympathies for Lazarus' and Steinthal's programme, he could not have expressed these sympathies in 1938 Nazi Germany. In any case, there are no indications that Hellpach had familiarized himself with the tradition of Berlin *Völkerpsychologie*. Hellpach took Wundt as his starting point.

Admittedly, Hellpach paid more attention to creative individuals than Wundt did. Alas, this did not incline him to studying in causal terms the production or reception of intellectual work. Hellpach's analysis was invariably superficial and schematic. And it was a far cry from the strong programme.

#### §5. *The Next Generation II: Simmel*

The *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* came to an end in 1890. It was officially replaced by the *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde*. The first number of the successor-journal contained a paper by Steinthal entitled "To the Reader" (1891); it looked back on the achievements of the past and suggested some future directions. Most of Steinthal's comments concerned the relationship *between Völkerpsychologie* and sociology is particularly noteworthy. Steinthal claimed that the two fields are identical since both studied "the psychological processes of human society." Steinthal concluded these remarks by directing his readers to Georg Simmel's (1858-1918) work for further analysis (1891, 16). This reference sounds like Steinthal was promoting Simmel to the position of closest successor to his own and Lazarus's work. Was Steinthal right to do so? Did Simmel live up to Steinthal's expectations?<sup>5</sup> To answer this question we need to take at least a brief look at Simmel's main publication during the 1890s.

In “*On a Relationship between the Theory of Selection and Epistemology*” (1885) Simmel defended an evolutionary account of truth and knowledge, writing “for an animal that belief is true which leads the animal to behave in its circumstances in the most advantageous way; and this because the demand for this behaviour has formed the very organs that shape the animal’s beliefs.” Simmel recognized that this thought naturally lead to assuming a plurality of sensory world and many, and incompatible, truths (1885: 75). As already mentioned above, this idea had roots in Comte, von Helmholtz and authors with Darwinian leanings. In siding with these authors, Simmel clearly went beyond Steinthal and Lazarus.

This was even more striking in Simmel’s scathing 1886-review of Steinthal’s *Ethik* (1885). The harshness of the criticism made it even more remarkable that Steinthal referred to Simmel so positively in 1891. Simmel regarded Steinthal’s compatibilist treatment of freedom of the will--a will is free if it is moral--as contradicting common sense (1886, 194). Simmel moreover rejected Steinthal’s defence of socialism as based on idealistic assumptions about social order and human motivation (1886, 200). Steinthal was also wrong to idealize Lazarus “objective spirit:” it was not the “locus of the ideals and all truth, beauty and goodness.” Objective spirit was a descriptive-explanatory, not a normative concept (1886, 209). In sum, Simmel was objecting to the ways in which Steinthal’s normative concerns watered down the potential of *Völkerpsychologie* as an explanatory-descriptive enterprise.

During the first six years (1889-1895) of work on what would in 1900 be published as the *Philosophie des Geldes*--his *chef d’oeuvre*--Simmel thought of the project as a “*Psychologie des Geldes*.” The first talk on the topic, offering a thumbnail sketch of the whole undertaking, was given with the latter title (1889). For instance, we are told that money has become ever more abstract as a tool; ever more impersonal and fluid; and that money is both the measure of other values, and a value itself. The move towards ever more

abstract tools was called a fundamental “*völkerpsychological change*” that can be found throughout the history of culture. The ever-more-abstract concept of money also facilitated ever-more-abstract ideas of God: both money and God are naturally thought of as a “*coincidentia oppositorum*” (1889, 64). This idea is the germ of the sociology of theological and philosophical knowledge that figures extensively in the *Philosophie des Geldes*. For our purposes it is noteworthy that in 1889 Simmel saw his project as in (the proximity of) *Völkerpsychologie*.

The *Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie* (1892a) too was both indebted to, and critical of, Lazarus’ and Steinthal’s *Völkerpsychologie*. Simmel followed Lazarus in proposing that all historical scholarship had its roots in theory-laden apperceptions of the historian. The historian could not but impute mental states to historical actors. But which mental states these were, depended as much on the personality and social background of the historian in question as it depended on the persons studied. Thus the historians’ subjectivity did not just play a role when they ordered the historical material for presentation; it already entered at the stage when historical facts--concerning the historical actors’ thinking and feeling--are constituted (1892a: 328a). Accordingly Simmel rejected Leopold von Ranke’s (1795-1886) idea according to which historians had to eliminate themselves in order to understand objectively. Simmel felt vindicated by the possibility of sociology of historical scholarship: sociologists were surely able to identify historians’ social positions and interests (1892, 326a). Although Simmel followed Lazarus’ lead concerning the “historical apriori,” he rejected the first-generation *völkerpsychologists*’ search for deterministic laws of historical development. At best, historians’ could identify general and vague “tendencies.” Simmel thus sided with Dilthey and Paul against Lazarus and Steinthal (1892a, 339-379).

Simmel’s 800-page *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft* (1892b, 1893) in many ways tried to do, for a range of moral concepts, what Cohen had done for “soul” and “God.” Simmel was particularly concerned to offer sociological and psychological explanations for why

“moral oughts” appear as unconditional and absolute (1892b, 15-91). In good *völkerpsychological* tradition, Simmel invoked the “narrowness of consciousness” to make sense of such absolute demands. First, he suggested that many of our moral intuitions originated in early “communist” social orders. Second, Simmel suspected that the norms prevalent in these early societies were later inherited as “dark drives and instincts.” Third, while in their original context, these norms were supported, and challenged, by a wide variety of considerations, most of “the reasons [for and against specific norms] ... by their sheer number pushed each other below the threshold of consciousness” (1892b, 29-30). This accounted for the “the appearance of groundlessness“ (1892b, 30).

Simmel claimed that we today stick to normative intuitions the origins of which we find “impossible ... to understand” (1892b, 29). Moral philosophers tried in vain to make sense of these origins by “fabricating transcendental powers” (1892b, 31). Instead of wasting time on such fabrications, philosophers would be better to focus on important psychological-sociological questions such as how compressed contents could possibly be “inherited.” Again Simmel offered a solution influenced by *Völkerpsychologie*: compressed contents were perhaps inherited as “dispositions ... of apperception” (1893, 91).

Although Simmel’s *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft* was concerned with ethical concepts, he also pointed out what he saw as parallels between the practical and the theoretical realms. In the latter realm, he wrote, “what is objective and true is nothing but the species-specific belief” (1892b, 71). In both cases, the “objective realm” was just “the accumulation and compression of the subjective realm,” and “the logical domain is simply the sum of the “individual-psychological domain” (1893, 21). For Simmel this thought lent support to the idea of a “relativity characterizes even the most fundamental ... elements of our worldview” (1893, 22).

As even this briefest of sketches brings out, Simmel's *Moralwissenschaft* was the culmination of his attempts to bring the strong programme of *Völkerpsychologie* to fruition in a most uncompromising fashion. Relativism, methodological neutrality and symmetry, causal explanations, psychological and sociological perspectives ... all these elements are present in Simmel's study. It is therefore easy to see that just around this time Steinthal could recognize Simmel as something of a natural heir to the strong version of *Völkerpsychologie*.

Why then did Simmel during the second half of the 1890s increasingly shift away from identifying himself with *Völkerpsychologie* and sociology? That the answer is not easy and straightforward can be appreciated by noting that the change of label for his overall research orientation conflicted with a continuity in key terms and ideas and with other developments in Simmel's professional life: for instance, "compression" and "relativism" remain central categories in Simmel's work; as late as 1893 he planned to start a sociology journal (Simmel 2005, 83); in 1898 and 1900 the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Berlin supported Simmel's promotion to the position of *Extraordinarius* professor in charge of sociology teaching (Simmel 2016, 247-249, 252-253); and in 1901 he was indeed appointed to teach primarily in this very area (Simmel 2005, 617).

I shall first address the question why *Völkerpsychologie* increasingly became a liability. I have already mentioned that Steinthal's *Ethik* of 1885 openly defended socialism. This no doubt went down badly with a conservative Prussian professoriate. Moreover, Berlin *Völkerpsychologie* was closely associated with Jewishness. Lazarus, Steinthal, Simmel, Cohen, and Wohlwill had a Jewish background. And Steinthal as well as Lazarus had used *Völkerpsychologie* as a weapon in the notorious Berlin "Antisemitismus-Streit" (Treitschke 1879, Lazarus 1880). Antisemitism at the time was rampant.<sup>6</sup> To pick just one example, Gustav von Schmoller (1838-1917)--while supporting Simmel in a number of ways<sup>7</sup>--still



characterized him in private correspondence as “... a typical Jewish-brooding mind ... a speculating Jew ...” (2005, 119).

Unfortunately, it was not only *Völkerpsychologie* that increasingly met with hostility—being labelled a “sociologist” was no less problematic. To begin with, critics like von Treitschke and Dilthey associated it with biological reductionism, social democracy and Marx. Treitschke insisted that “society” did not exist as a separate entity, and that therefore sociology had no subject matter (1859, 1874). Treitschke’s student, Berlin historian Dietrich Schäfer (1845-1929) effectively prevented Simmel from getting a professorial chair in Heidelberg (in 1908) with the comment: “It is a terrible mistake to let ‘society’ replace state and church as the decisive organ for human sociability” (Simmel 2016, 287). It is likely that such views were influential when in 1898 the minister for the universities considered the petition by the Philosophical Faculty for an *Extraordinarius* position for Simmel to teach sociology and philosophy of the social sciences. Indeed, there are even grounds for suspecting that the very petition was “poisoned:” Simmel was portrayed as a Darwinist, a sociologist and *völkerpsychologist* (Simmel 2016, 247-248). When the faculty tried again in 1900, Simmel was presented more positively, that is, as the right person to reign in the sociological pseudoscientists (2016, 253). This time the petition was successful—at least in part. Simmel was appointed *Extraordinarius* but without a salary. When the Prussian officer responsible for the universities, Ludwig Elster (1856-1935) was asked about this in parliament, he explained by saying that Simmel was “merely a sociologist” (Simmel 2005, 617) Little wonder then that from around 1897 onwards Simmel started complaining about being thought of as a sociologist (2005, 343).

Simmel’s *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft* with its *völkerpsychological* and sociological attack on philosophical ethics added to his problems.<sup>8</sup> Simmel and others attest to the fact that it was frequently described as “sociological and evolutionist” (Simmel 2016,

287), and as “purely negative” (Simmel 2005, 613) as such. Schmoller was particularly concerned about this (Simmel 2005, 119, 327).

To make matters worse, the second half of the 1890s saw the culmination of the so-called “cultural history wars:” especially the debate over the relationship between economic history and political history (of the state). The most visible advocate of the right, or even the primacy, of culture history, was the historian Karl Lamprecht (1865-1915). Lamprecht wanted historians to formulate and test causal, statistical laws concerning economic and psychological development (1896, 7, 20). Interestingly enough, Lamprecht frequently acknowledged *Völkerpsychologie* and sociology as forerunners and allies. (1896, 17) Indeed, in 1896 Lamprecht went so far as to put in print that Lazarus’ reflections on ideas in history were superior to Ranke’s (1896, 72). That was something like the ultimate *lèse-majesté*, and not only for the neo-Rankeans. And to add insult to injury, Lamprecht analyzed Ranke’s “ideas” as a “compressed complex of beliefs” going back to Luther and Fichte. (1896, 21, 33-35) The Berlin historians and philosophers--and the influential Neo-Kantians and Neo-Rankeans elsewhere--were Lamprecht’s central sworn enemies. Lamprecht was repeatedly accused of “materialism” (Lamprecht 1896, 12; 1899, 30-35).

Simmel was perceived as a Lamprecht-sympathiser. For instance, an article in *Der sozialistische Student* (1897; Simmel 2005, 273-275) praised Simmel for turning “cultural history” from being “the horror of philosophers into one of the most attractive fields.” Simmel’s openness for “materialist conceptions of history” was commended, too. With friends like this, Simmel needed no enemies, especially as even sympathetic neo-Kantians treated him highly ambivalently. Heinrich Rickert (1863-1936) for instance called Simmel an ally against Lamprecht in 1899 (1899, 69), but then chastised him three years later for “overestimating the role of psychology in the foundations of the humanities” (1902, 543).

I hope these rough pointers suffice to make plausible that Simmel was under pressure to distance himself from the *Völkerpsychologie* and sociology that had provided him with his central intellectual tools. He continued using these tools in *Philosophie des Geldes*, but without acknowledgements or references. Alas, this fooled no-one. To win appointment to a professorial chair in Strasbourg (in 1915) Simmel had to break much more radically with his intellectual past. But that is another story.

### §6. *Summary*

This paper tried to provide a bird's-eye-view of Berlin *Völkerpsychologie*, its reception and further development. Since my story covered eighty years of intellectual development, it had to set aside numerous intriguing details, and focus on general intellectual and social patterns. Although this form of analysis is rare in this journal, it seems to me to be an important form of historiography for HOPOS. Some important intellectual developments simply do not become visible unless one goes beyond the focus on a small set of texts.

I have tried to show that the initial project of Lazarus and Steinthal was ambiguous in that it left room for both strong and moderate versions. To repeat, the strong version centered around methodological neutrality and symmetry, causal explanations of beliefs, causal laws, determinism, a focus on groups, traditions, and materiality, and a self-referential model of institutions. These ideas were central to authors like Wohlwill, Cohen, Windelband or Simmel, who applied them to the history and philosophy of science, logic, ethics and myths. The weak programme involved the blurring of explanatory and normative interests, an emphasis on freedom of the will, anti-relativism, anti-materialism, and a hostility towards sociology. The weak programme had an afterlife, too in that later research projects keeping the label “*Völkerpsychologie*” (Wundt, Hellpach, Thurnwald) followed it. Here *Völkerpsychologie* became dissociated from the study of science.

In many ways this paper offers more a programme for research than final results. Still, I hope to have made plausible that some of the (one-time) *völkerpsychologists* discussed here – Lazarus, Steinthal, Wohlwill, Cohen, Windelband, or Simmel – deserve more scholarly attention than they have received to date. It seems particularly desirable to situate these authors' views on the natural and social sciences, as well as the *Geisteswissenschaften*, in the broader context of the development of philosophical and historical reflections on the sciences in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Europe.

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Abbreviation:

Z for: “Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft”.

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<sup>1</sup> There is no established English translation, since the term has no single English equivalent. I shall therefore stick to the German term throughout.

<sup>2</sup> The allusion to the distinction between “strong” and “weak” programmes in the “sociology of scientific knowledge” is intentional (Bloor 1991). Indeed, the strong programme of *Völkerpsychologie* resembles the strong programme in the sociology of scientific knowledge. Limitations of space prevent me from developing this parallel in detail.

<sup>3</sup> I have also greatly profited from Belke (1971b), Beiser (2011, 472-479; 2018, 22-28); Köhnke (1996, 337-355; 2001); Meschiari (1997). Klautke (2013) is an invaluable resource concerning the later fate of *Völkerpsychologie*.

<sup>4</sup> For a rich account of Cohen’s “life and work,” see Beiser (2018). Beiser pays close attention to the links between Cohen and *Völkerpsychologie*. See also Köhnke (2001).

<sup>5</sup> In thinking through these issues, I have greatly profited from Köhnke (1984, 1990, 1996), Goodstein (2017, 15-24), Frisby (2002, chap. 2), Geßner (2003), Meschiari (1997).

<sup>6</sup> See Köhnke (1995), and for general background Mosse (1998).

<sup>7</sup> See Dahme (1993), Schullerus (2000).

<sup>8</sup> Köhnke (1996: 169-190). See also Orsucci (1993).