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**OCENE**

***RECENSIONI***

***REVIEWS***



*Jakob Norberg*: THE BROTHERS GRIMM AND THE MAKING OF GERMAN NATIONALISM. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022, 268 pages.

Jakob Norberg's monograph on the brothers Grimm is not the first study to directly link the German philologists and authors of world-famous collections of fairy tales with the rise of nationalism in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century German lands. However, Norberg, a professor of German studies and researcher of »political concepts«, takes a different approach compared to previous analyses, which have mostly been focused on analyzing the components of nationalism in their *Children's and Household Tales*. He is primarily interested in the Grimms as representative of a specific profile of European scientists who, against the background of social and political changes after the French Revolution, participated in building a new model of legitimization of political power, tied to the idea of the organic concept of cultural community. Norberg outlines the specifics and antagonisms of cultural nationalism and sharpens them in comparisons with other political currents of the time.

Already in the introductory chapter, he set the tone for his research by establishing a dichotomy between the »philosopher king« and the »philologist king«. According to Norberg, the first is embodied by Plato with his political philosophy oriented towards reflections upon universal justice, the second by the brothers Grimm, who conditioned the exercise of ideal political authority with the linguistic and historical delineation of the community. The arguments made in the book are based on these parallels. Norberg presents cultural nationalism as a narrow, but also intellectually contradictory response to the 19<sup>th</sup> century socio-political dilemmas. By quoting scholar of nationalism John Breuilly he emphasizes that the principle of nationality was developed in a narrower group of »second-rank thinkers«. With the exception of Herder and Fichte, the leading thinkers of the era found nothing intellectually interesting or challenging in this newly emerged political idea of community. Norberg supports this argument by employing the notions of sociologist Ernest Gellner that nationalist doctrines »are hardly worth analyzing«. Rather than demanding intellectual discourse, they represent a kind of religion. Norberg emphasizes that nationalism was initially indeed a scientific project which stemmed from a specific method in researching the past. It was, however, very soon motivated by nation-building tendencies rather than by scientific findings.

Norberg devotes a good part of the book to an analysis of the establishment of a new regime of knowledge production, the key goal of which was the legitimization of a new form of political order. This is illustrated by an analysis of the Grimm brothers' key works, *German Grammar* (1819, 1826, 1831, 1837), *German Legal Antiquities* (1829), and *German Mythology* (1835). He argues that they were written with the clear intention of distinguishing the particularities of German language and culture, which was supported by analyses of the assumed continuous settlement of the territory and the organic

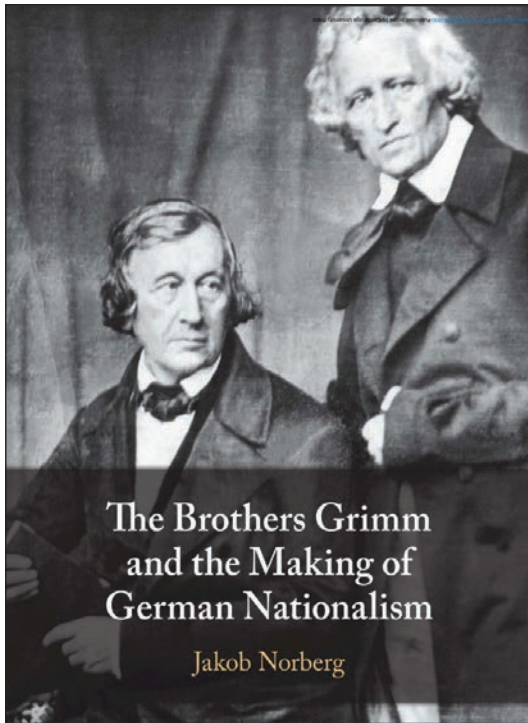


connection of German history, people and forms of organizing life. All this is best expressed in Jacob Grimm's monumental last work, *The History of the German Language* (1848).

The special value of Norberg's book is in the detailed analysis of the political activities of the brothers Grimm. It is precisely here, where the antagonisms in the application of the cultural organic community in the nation-building project are most clearly expressed. Norberg offers a comprehensive analysis of the political profile of Jacob Grimm, the more politically active of the brothers. The author portrays him as a typical academically educated thinker who spent large part of his life working as librarian, but was later also a professor and for a few months in 1848 a member of the Frankfurt National Parliament. There he stood for that the otherwise Danish-ruled but German-speaking duchy of Holstein should be under German control. Norberg placed great emphasis on this speech, while Grimm addressed a letter with a similar request to the Prussian king Frederick William IV. Norberg notes that only in the field that concerns the delineation of territories on the basis of language and the demarcation of German and un-German (*deutsch and undeutsch*) Grimm felt competent, but also called to speak, even to advise kings and princes. With regard to other questions concerning the foundations of good government he was undecided and vacillating. »Legitimate government was,

for him, not first and foremost a matter of a just distribution of goods, protected basic rights, or popular consent, but of a close cultural fit between rulers and ruled« (p. 5). If the Grimms perceived themselves primarily as guardians, even redeemers of German culture, they tied their political role to the belief that they should be treated as "mediators" between the »organic people« and their king.

*Children's and Household Tales* are the youthful work of the brothers Grimm, but key to their scientific and political profiling. At the same time, their collections of fairy tales, which were first published in 1812 and 1815, mark a key turning point in the conception of history from the perspective of cultural nationalism. Although the Grimms



wrote in the preface of their fairy-tale collection that they did not significantly change the obtained narrative heritage, later analysis showed this to be untrue. In the 1980s, John M. Ellis, professor of German literature at the University of California, in the book *One Fairy Story Too Many: The Brothers Grimm and Their Tales* noted that they very freely and completely unscientifically adapted the narrative sources (later also archival materials) with the aim of affirming German culture. It is interesting, however, that some prominent theorists of fairy-tales rejected Ellis' findings with the thesis that the Grimms were only adapting the narrative tradition to bourgeois taste. The current consensus is that their collecting of fairy-tales was also motivated by a response to the French occupation of their native Hesse.

Norberg took a step further in this research. He conducted a detailed analysis of their writings on the German proto-nationalists, some of whom were also personally known to them. Their correspondence shows that they were inspired by the ardent opponent of French rule, the historian Heinrich Luden, nationalistic historian, poet and essayist Ernst Moritz Arndt, the Herderian thinker Friedrich Ludwig Jahn and the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Jacob Grimm wrote to his mentor Friedrich Carl von Savigny that Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation* was the best work he had ever read. Norberg points out their translation of the medieval militant poem *Der arme Heinrich*, as they wanted to use the proceeds to help their compatriots in the fight against the French invaders. But he also notes that they soon understood their historical role in strengthening German exceptionalism, i.e. not through militant nationalism, but – complementary to it – through the invention of the cultural space of Germanness. Their collections of fairy-tales are an expression of this mentality. »While the collection of tales was not a repository of martial values and attitudes, to be evoked with pathos in a popular struggle for recovered national German or local autonomy, they did represent a cultural space to be cherished and protected, the mundane but cozy places around the hearth and the kitchen, typically tended to by women« (p. 61). With his analysis, which takes into account broader political and socio-historical contexts, Norberg succeeds in his aim of transforming the established image of the brothers Grimm as homey folklorists, lovers of German words and stories. Of course, the reader will form his own opinion – also on the basis of other studies – to which extent their fairy-tales were motivated by nationalism.

Although the focus of Norberg's book is on the lives and work of the brothers Grimm, this is namely primarily a theoretical study of cultural nationalism, i.e. a study of the political idea, its evolution and early manifestations. It could be said that it is among the more revealing, since it directs attention to the main source of the power of nationalism. Despite all the later theories of the nation, primordialist or constructivist, comparative and synthetic approaches and the multitude of typologies of this social phenomenon, it returns to its origins and reminds us that cultural nationalism is basically a very simple mechanism that tries to ground the political system to an unscientific, teleological re-reading of history.

Through a socio-historical analysis of the Grimm's fairy-tales, especially of the way in which they addressed the proto-political elements in the community, this general feature of nationalism is sharply brought into focus. Namely, Norberg's study suggests that cultural nationalism is an easily adaptable, but theoretically difficult political ideology to encompass, since it bases its legitimizing power on pre-ideological, pre-discursive formations, while constantly erasing the traces of their seams. Norberg seems fully aware of this, which is why he prefers to describe rather than to theorize on this social phenomenon.

Historically, cultural nationalism may have contributed to the stabilization of the political space, but democratic rights in nation-states flourished only after its evacuation from public discourse. In this respect, cultural nationalism has nothing to do with patriotism, although it tries to appropriate love of country. In the dichotomy between the »philosopher king« and the »philologist king«, Norberg clearly takes the side of the former, also by hinting that providing a good quality of life to all members of the community, regardless of their cultural or other affiliations, is also, if not the most patriotic act.

**Marjan Horvat**