

Cowan, Robert: *The Indo-German Identification. Reconciling South Asian Origins and European Destinies, 1765-1885*. Rochester: Camden House 2010. ISBN: 9781571134639; 225 S.

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In his book, *The Indo-German Identification*, Robert Cowan argues lucidly that „The personal struggles of the Indo-Germans lie at the core of Western conceptions of racial, aesthetic, and religious origins; happiness, pessimism, and nihilism; and human freedom and perfection“ (p. 7). These struggles, he insists “[bear] on the twentieth-century history of Europe in ways that are more profound than any other so-called Orientalist history“ (ibid.), by which he means, of course, those of France and Britain.

This book appears amidst a flurry of scholarly activity in the study of German Orientalism, with recent works by scholars in a variety of disciplines, such as Dorothy Figueira, Tuska Benes, Indra Sengupta, Bradley Herling, Douglas McGetchin, Pascale Rabault-Feuerhahn, and Suzanne Marchand, as well as by the author of this review. (Cowan addresses this literature, and the place of his own work within it, on pp. 2-3 of his Introduction.) Professor Cowan’s argument is similar to the ones put forward in these other scholarly works in the sense that he is attempting to steer a path between the seminal influence of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978)¹, and various efforts that have been made more recently to move beyond the paradigm created by Said.

Whereas other scholars have focused on examinations of institutional orientalism (McGetchin, Marchand), linguistics and philology (Herling, Benes), and the influence of political and religious ideology (Germana, Peter K.J. Park), Cowan draws attention to „each of these strands within the context of individual thinkers who were engaged in attempts to define themselves and understand their own history“ through their engagement with Indian thought (p. 3). The chapters of the book examine the intellectual struggles of such luminaries as Johann Gottfried Herder, Friedrich von Hardenberg (No-

valis), Friedrich Schlegel, Friedrich Schelling, Schopenhauer, Hegel, and Nietzsche with the „mythical image of India“ (p. 5).

The strength and value of this approach is that it provides a more nuanced understanding of the place (or, more accurately, places) of this „mythical image“² in German society in this period, and pays greater respect to the concept of individual philosophical and religious inquiry than most theory-driven accounts are likely to offer. Cowan clearly knows the important scholarly work in postcolonial studies (citing especially Sheldon Pollock’s influential essay „Deep Orientalism? Notes on Sanskrit and Power Beyond the Raj“)³, and acknowledges the inescapable reality of the European colonial project, but also insists on the necessity of Orientalism as a personal, as well as a political, journey. Or, more to the point, Cowan is interested in exploring the myriad ways in which the personal is political (and historical), but is not, therefore, entirely reducible to politics (nationalist or imperialist).

The strength of Robert Cowan’s book is also, ironically, the source of its main weakness. In his conclusion, Cowan states, „Where the personal, the philosophical, and the political come together for the Indo-Germans is in the individualized compulsion to find a philosophical/religious basis for the connection between ancient Indian civilization and the modern German nation“ (p. 188). While this book does an exemplary job identifying and analyzing the personal and philosophical aspects of the works of the „Indo-Germans,“ the historian is left wanting more with regard to the political, and just how these influences inter-connect. I will focus on two examples, which I have chosen, admittedly, because they are also central to my own work – Friedrich Schlegel and Hegel.

Friedrich Schlegel’s thinking about the historical, cultural, and even racial connections between Vedic India and modern Germany played a crucial role in the „emerging anthro-

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York 1978.

² A phrase coined by A. Leslie Willson, *A Mythical Image. The Ideal of India in German Romanticism*, Durham 1964

³ in: Carol A. Breckenridge / Peter van der Veer (eds.), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament. Perspectives on South Asia*, Philadelphia 1993, pp. 76-133.

polological theories of his own time, establishing a line of thought that [Leon] Poliakov argues led to the 'Aryan myth'" (p. 108). The Indo-German connection that Schlegel articulates in his orientalist magnum opus, *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* (1808) was the result of almost a decade of intense fascination with, study of, and reflection on Oriental literature and thought (most intensively in Paris and Köln from 1802-1808). This was a personal journey for Schlegel, and he emerged from it with remarkably different views on the meaning of history, religion, and revelation than he had when he began. Cowan does not, however, retrace Schlegel's personal, philosophical, or political development prior to 1808 in any detail. Schlegel's early references to India and the Orient, most notably in „Gespräch über die Poesie“ (1800), are given scant attention, as are his remarkable lectures on „Universalgeschichte“, offered in Köln in 1805 and 1806. It was in these lectures that Schlegel first postulated publicly about a *Völkerwanderung*, a mass migration out of ancient India into northern and central Europe. It is this „line of thought“ that led later in the century to the „Aryan myth“ described by Poliakov. Without retracing the development of Schlegel's thinking from the Early Romantic circle in Berlin to employment in the Metternich regime, it is difficult to identify and understand the connections between his personal philosophical and religious development and the political context in which it took place. (It should be noted that this period in Schlegel's orientalist career is consistently overlooked in nearly all of the recent literature.)

A similar argument might be made about the lack of contextualization in Cowan's treatment of Hegel. Hegel's thinking about India, and India's role in his philosophy of history, cannot be adequately understood without examining it in the light of his animosity toward the „Indomania“ of the Early Romantics, Schlegel foremost among them. Likewise, Hegel's disdain for the „irrationalism“ of Indian art and literature (pp. 134-7) was tied to his personal attitudes about Catholicism (also associated in his mind with the Schlegels). Just as significantly, while Robert Cowan briefly notes that Hegel's view of In-

dian thought was derived from „the commentaries on and translations of Sanskrit literature of his day“ (p. 132), he does not elaborate on what those sources, in fact, were. Here he misses an important opportunity to explore another set of connections (international, imperialist) in Hegel's work. Hegel relied heavily, and uncritically, on reports and commentaries by English colonial officials in his study of Indian culture. Hegel's sympathies with these sources, and one might say with the colonial project they supported, are clear from such proclamations as „The English, or rather the East India Company, are the lords of the land; for it is the necessary fate of Asiatic Empires to be subjected to Europeans.“⁴

No one book can be all things to all readers, and none should be expected to. Robert Cowan's book takes the scholarly discourse on German Orientalism in an important new direction with his thoroughly-researched and well-argued reminder that the subjects of our work were real human beings, real individuals, who brought their personal psychological, philosophical, religious, and political baggage to the reading table. As we reflect on their work, we should reflect on the baggage we, too, bring to the table.

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⁴ Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree, Buffalo 1991, pp. 142-3.