

Conclusion

The lives and careers of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm coincided with a dramatic reorganization of political space in Central Europe. The brothers were born in 1785 and 1786 as subjects in a midsize principality in the mosaic of the Holy Roman Empire but would witness how drawn-out continental war, foreign occupation, and multiple territorial reconfigurations transformed their familiar context. They packed up everything to move away more than once, from their hometown Kassel to Göttingen in the kingdom of Hanover and, finally, to Berlin, the large capital of Prussia. When Jacob Grimm passed away in 1863, German unification was less than a decade away. To a significant degree, the brothers themselves contributed to a form of cultural consolidation. They tirelessly collected and promoted German antiquities and folkloric materials and made them available for mass circulation, insisted on linguistic and cultural criteria for political belonging, and claimed that philology could disentangle peoples and territories from one another with scientific precision. Skeptical about the relevance of traditional nobility, Jacob Grimm even argued for some moderate leveling of social gradations within the national space. The ideal was one nationally defined people under one king rather than a plethora of feudally stratified populations. In this way, the brothers Grimm sought to prepare the cultural, social, and political “closure” around a national form that they believed they could delineate.¹ In response to the dissolution of the old order of their childhood and early youth, they embraced national communities as the basis for new, non-arbitrary political units and introduced technical-grammatical criteria for settling the borders of appropriately sized future states.

Over his career, Jacob Grimm became an increasingly active figure on a national stage in the process of construction: he published in newspapers, chaired a national association of scholars, and became a deputy in the first national parliament. In this way, he emerged as an agent and embodiment of the trans-local and trans-regional scope of politics. He used his opportunities to speak publicly to define German nationhood rather than envisage more

clearly and distinctly the constitution of a new political form. His political mission was first and foremost to establish the *contours* of the nation and less to transform its internal political organization. As we have seen, this program in no way involved dismantling monarchy but rather aimed to nationalize dynastic kingship, to nudge the ruler himself to endorse a national foundation for the state, respect linguistic borders, and in this way become a “philologist king.” Jacob Grimm could praise the wisdom, justice, and strength of monarchs but wanted to add to this traditional catalogue of virtues an exclusive love for the nationalized people.

It is already widely known today that the Grimms sought to restore a historical folk culture to highlight and reinforce a collective German identity, but their orientation toward monarchy as the still-dominant political system of their day meant that the philologists faced a two-sided task of persuasion: regular people in their varied localities had to begin to understand themselves as members of a larger, imagined unit with sharp outer edges – the nation – but the king also had to begin to prioritize national affection and attachment over dynastic, non-national links to aristocracy and royalty. Encouraged and supervised by philologists as experts on national being, both the people *and* the political elite had to grasp the all-important political value of cultural likeness and come to appreciate their mutual, cross-hierarchical affinity.

The Grimms’ commitment to the culturalization and nationalization of politics was rooted in their socialization and class context. They were educated sons in a family of petty officials who set out to find employment in a small state ruled by a patrimonial regime; although a series of disruptions compelled them to leave their home, they always remained within the milieu of state administration or state-sponsored academia. Intensely attached to their province as proud Hessians, they nonetheless relocated successfully, taking up new positions as university-trained civil servants prepared for archival and educational tasks. As their trajectory indicates, they were sufficiently educated and mobile not to have their lives narrowly defined by local opportunities and constraints. Without a patrician background, however, they never felt at ease in urbane circles or outside of German lands and never embraced a cosmopolitan outlook. While polyglot as scholars, they favored the vernacular, and even though they cherished their Hessian dialect, they celebrated the unified and unifying national language. Their work consisted in gently fusing local cultural environments into a single national space, all the while adamantly defending this now nationally defined particularity against the threat of non-national, imperial homogenization. They were nationally employable clerks, working for a succession of

states headed by traditionalist electors and kings, and stayed within the compass of German-speaking lands. As such, the Grimms were vanguard representatives of an educated middle class composed partly of journalists, schoolteachers, lawyers, and officials who stood to gain from unified national spaces and typically “manned the battle-lines of linguistic nationalism.”²

In a sense, the brothers Grimm wanted to remake the world in their own image: everyone should understand themselves as members of a nation living in one continuous national space under a king. While they did not view their project as a magnification of their socially shaped preferences, they clearly developed an exalted conception of the philologist’s mission: it was the task of the Germanist scholar to remind the people of their shared roots and cultural cohesion as well as to advise rulers on the scientifically discernible, nonnegotiable borders of this people. Their chief means of cultural influence was a series of collections. The philological collector and editor could represent the community to itself by assembling and making available its neglected treasures of national expressivity, treasures that could focus and reinforce the love of the nation for its history and character. The philologist, and not the creative artist, could properly tend to the nation’s particularity, its evolved “own-ness” or *Eigenthümlichkeit*, and convert it into legible artifacts such as the *Children’s and Household Tales* that could then function as plausible instantiations of a collective cultural property or *Eigenthum*.³ For the Grimms, shared national identity was exemplified and sustained by a kind of fictional joint ownership over collective literary resources. The resulting repositories of shared narratives and cultural traditions were eminently political objects, but often because their content was politically innocent. Through their display of supposed naturalness, these curated collections documented the already existing and self-sustaining cultural togetherness of the popular community that should be respected by the political elite.

Each chapter of this study has reconstructed an aspect of this philological-political project. According to the Grimms, philologists could, thanks to their grammatical expertise, trace the boundaries of languages in space and reliably designate speakers as members of a fraternal collective in a sustaining fatherland; study and promote an intergenerationally transmitted mother tongue that tied people together and anchored their insider status in early intimate socialization; and, finally, follow this mother tongue back to the idioms of a cluster of related tribal communities, whose spontaneous collective song had survived not only in textual fragments of heroic epics but also in the marginal folktales and legends that now must be salvaged and disseminated within the nation’s borders. Having experienced the military

and diplomatic remaking of states in their youth, the Grimms developed a series of interlinked practices such as grammatical discernment and textual collection and transcription to claim that the modern scholar could best watch over the integrity of the communal linguistic and cultural substance of the people.

Most of the commentary on nationalism is severely critical of its beliefs and symbols. The academic entrepreneurs of early nationalism such as the brothers Grimm, critics point out, accumulated piles of cultural debris to build a spurious collective identity designed for the purpose of muting class antagonism and excluding newly defined minorities from political enfranchisement. Much of this study has also been devoted to detecting the limits and contradictions of the Grimms' project. The authentic folktale was very much an editorial product in which cross- or non-national tales were instrumentalized for political purposes, the mother tongue depended on politically mandated institutionalized schooling, the tribal community was a projection of the imperial imagination, and the philologist a figure with an inescapably imperial perspective on languages and groups.

The sociologist Ernst Gellner has listed some contradictions between nationalism's self-image and its actual character: the ideology

claims to defend folk culture while in fact it is forging a high culture; it claims to protect an old folk society while in fact helping to build up an anonymous mass society. . . . It preaches and defends continuity, but owes everything to a decisive and unutterably profound break in human history. It preaches and defends cultural diversity, when in fact it imposes homogeneity.⁴

Yet the tensions between continuity and discontinuity, diversity and homogeneity, rustic folk culture and bookish scholarly culture were addressed by the Grimms themselves. The brothers knew well that local dialects were receding, that collective traditions of storytelling were coming to an end, that the Germanic tribes were all long gone and that almost nothing had survived of their cultures, that old grammatical forms tended to erode, and Jacob Grimm even suspected that smaller Germanic languages such as Icelandic would fade away in some future of intensified linguistic convergence.⁵ Against the background of these insights, the Grimms' aim was not exactly to preserve an authentic culture but to represent the surviving materials of the past and make them available under new social and media conditions, an intervention that, in the case of oral tradition, might even hasten the decline of previous forms of cultural transmission.

In this light, the brothers did not simply preach continuity and diversity while imposing modernity and homogeneity. Rather, they tried to manage the transition from past to present, from local community to anonymous society, by reconstructing and protecting cultural particularity in the guise of, or at the level of, consolidated nationhood. Their projects of collection and dissemination consisted in designing a set of tangible compromises between a threatened cultural world and the tendencies of political centralization, societal modernization, and linguistic standardization. The underlying question of their work thus reads: what forms of individuality can be preserved at all under the current conditions, and with what means? From this perspective, the German nation they conjured was not necessarily the only authentic form or the most optimal one under all circumstances; the Grimms were aware of too many ongoing, unavoidable transformations and losses. Instead, the nation emerged as a form in which a significant degree of linguistic and cultural particularity could still be preserved and defended, thanks to its compatibility with a fortified, sovereign state under philologically informed monarchical leadership. The guiding concern of the Grimms was to promote cultural and linguistic particularity as the object of affection and source of existential meaning, and if nationhood was not the only imaginable kind of cultural individuality, it was clearly the most viable and resilient one – the one that could survive. They knew that old, homey provinces with all their local charms were politically feeble but believed that vast continental-imperial domains were too domineering and too colorless. Only the nation combined emotional attractiveness with future political strength, the promise of identity with the promise of stability. With this in mind, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm sought to persuade both the people and the king of the importance of nationhood and also to shape this nationhood so as to suit a more centralized political rule over a more uniform society.