Chapter 10
'*Volksgeist*'

Moritz Lazarus' Social Ontology

Many universities award prizes for outstanding PhD-theses, but only the University of Bern does so in the name of *Moritz Lazarus*. Even in Bern, however, only a small minority will know anything about the person behind that name. The laureates of the Lazarus-prize should at least know who Lazarus was, and why their prize is named after him. Thus, in a short memorandum distributed over the university homepage, some background information is provided. Lazarus, it is explained, co-founded *Völkerpsychologie* (translated as *psychology of nations* hereafter) together with Heyman Steinthal. From 1860 to 1866, the memorandum continues, Lazarus was a full professor at the University of Bern, a time during which he also served as dean of the humanities department, and even as the university's president. Special emphasis is laid on the fact that Lazarus' lectures were attended by an extremely wide audience, attracting even the non-academic public of the city to the university halls. In contrast to these remarks on Lazarus' public success, the comments on the *content* of Lazarus' teaching are much more restrained in tone, to say the least. Even though the memorandum acknowledges Lazarus' efforts to introduce a historical perspective in social psychology, it is stated that his intellectual venture, his psychology of nations, simply "has to be considered a failure".[1]

This is a harsh statement indeed, especially considering the fact that it was Lazarus himself who donated this price. So what is so bad about his psychology of nations that not even the University of Bern, with the best of reasons to do so, can find more positive words? What is the reason for this thoroughly negative view?

It is very likely that the main reason for this negative assessment lies in the *central notion* of Lazarus' psychology of nations. That notion is the *Volksgeist*. According to the most condensed definition that Lazarus gives of his intellectual venture in all of his work, psychology of nations is, very simply, the "science of the *Volksgeist*". Psychology of nations is about giving a psychological description of the "essence" of the *Volksgeist*, and to discover its governing laws (Lazarus [1851–65] 2003: 4, 7, 8).[2]

In our day, however, the very word *Volksgeist*, is something of a red flag. When it comes to that term, even as cautious, balanced and even-tempered an encyclopedia

[1] Cf. www.kommunikation.unibe.ch/communiques/2002/020531lazaruspreis.html (found in January 2005).

[2] After this referred to as GVK.

H.B. Schmid, *Plural Action: Essays in Philosophy and Social Science*, Contributions to Phenomenology 58,

as the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* loses its notorious reticence. The *Volksgeist*, the *Historisches Wörterbuch* says, is a thoroughly "compromised notion", and it is with good reason that it is shunned (Grossmann 2001: 1106). This view seems to be almost universally shared. Browsing the relevant literature, the only exception to this rule I know of is a group or movement of followers of the German thinker Rudolf Steiner. Among the Anthroposophists, as they call themselves, the term *Volksgeist* still seems to be a part of their view of the social world, or was at least until well into the 1960s of the past century (Heyer 1990). Apart from this exception, the verdict seems to be unanimous. There is no question that this concept is simply unfit for the analysis of the social world.

§33 The Collective Mind – Past and Present

No wonder the *Volksgeist* has such a bad reputation: even the most cursory look at the history of the concept immediately reveals how deeply the notion is imbued with ideas some of which might appear simply mysterious, but most of which are outright abominable. Indeed, large parts of the history of the *Volksgeist* read like a list of excellent reasons *against* this concept. Here are some examples. Very often, the main purpose of the term *Volksgeist* seems to be to tie a nation's self-determination down to some alleged historical fate or destiny, or to some ready-made boundaries, guiding lines, or some other contingent circumstances which seem external to the process of political self-determination. This is particularly notable in the *German Historical School of Law*, in which the term was widely used. A favorable description of the role of the term in this school can be found in Erich Rothacker's introduction to the *Geisteswissenschaften* – it should be noted, however, that later in his life, Rothacker saw the German *Volksgeist* come to its perfection in Adolf Hitler's rule (Rothacker 1920: 37ff.). But even apart from its association with National Socialism, the concept does not appeal to us. Conceived of in terms of *Volksgeist*, a nation's shared identity is not seen as a matter of the shared intentions and aims of people, and not as a matter of the joint initiatives, shared projects and practices, but as a matter of what people *are*, as a matter of some *given*, of people's adventitious stigmata such as their origin. In the worst case, the unity of the *Volksgeist* is even seen in something like a "racial bond of blood".[3] Even in the case of the pre-Nazi notion of *Volksgeist*, the aim behind the concept is to conceive of social identity in terms of what people *are* instead of in terms of what they *do*. Even here, the concept is accompanied by more or less overt depreciation of both individual autonomy and collective democratic self-determination. Volksgeist seems to be a notion that is both genuinely anti-liberal and anti-democratic. Both of these tendencies are particularly obvious in Othmar Spann's thinking. The aim behind Spann's use of the term is to depart with the principle of self-determination as a guiding theme, and to turn to some "unity" (*Ganzheit*) that is seen as the "nourishing father

[3] An example for this is Larenz (1935); esp. p. 43.

of the human spirit" (Spann 1921: 96–111). In any case, *Volksgeist* stands for anti-individualism and, very often, for a turn away from rationality and the enlightenment as guiding lines, and away from the principles of the French Revolution. In his *Dawn* (also translated as *Daybreak)*, Nietzsche discusses the *Volksgeist* under the significant heading "the Germans' hostility against the enlightenment". The *Volksgeist*, Nietzsche says, is among the "helpmates of the obscuring, quixotic, degenerating mind" (Nietzsche [1881] 1977: 171ff.). Obviously, there is a political agenda behind the concept which is to restore some social substance that according to the proponents of the *Volksgeist* has been eroded by liberalism and democracy.[4]

Sometimes, the concept simply serves to propagate cultural homogenization and the exclusion of otherness.[5] *Volksgeist* stands for the fight against "foreign intruders threatening our own characteristics", and even for the fight against the use of foreign words in the German language (which Otto von Gierke [1915: 24] seems to consider a particularly dangerous transgression against the *Volksgeist)*. Thus the term is directly connected with sheer chauvinism, a role for which it seems to be particularly well suited.[6] *Volksgeist* is a conceptual tool for social *exclusion*, and thus incompatible with any participatory view of membership.

So much for the history of the *Volksgeist*, read as a list of arguments against that concept. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the *Volksgeist* nicely epitomizes the exact opposite of any normative idea that is near and dear to most of us in our social and political thought. "*Volksgeist*" is the perfect antonym to almost every valid normative political ideal: enlightenment and modernity, liberalism and democracy, the value of individual autonomy and collective self-determination, and the recognition of cultural differences.

Yet the fact that it seems normatively unacceptable is not the only thing that is problematic about the *Volksgeist*. It is also *ontologically dubious*, to say the least. The critics of the *Volksgeist* have expressed their doubts as to whether there could ever *be* such a thing as a *Volksgeist* quite openly, labeling it a mere "phantom". Friedrich Nietzsche expresses his skepticism as follows. It is "dangerous", he says, "to predicate anything of a nation", because this leads to an "illusion of unity" (Nietzsche [1872–1874] 1978: 253). Along similar lines, Georg Jellinek says about the *Volksgeist* that it is "merely a specter" (Jellinek 1914: 153).

This ontological problem, however, is not specific to the *Volksgeist*. Rather, it concerns all the members of its wider semantical family. All conceptions of the collective mind, and of the collective person or subject are confronted with the same skepticism. Some of these ideas might not be as tightly linked to such disastrous normative political ideas as the *Volksgeist*. Yet in an ontological perspective, they are no less dubious. As a look into the relevant literature reveals, the critics of any such

[4] This is explicit in Spann (1921).

[5] Cf. Ludendorff (1933).

[6] For an obvious example see Gierke (1915: 5). Gierke greets the break out of the first world war as a "state in which the Volksgeist finally takes possession of each and every individual soul, and, by coming to life as a great unified 'I', erases any consciousness of the individual I's". Gierke (1915: 29) also claims that the German Volksgeist is much better at that than any other Volksgeist.

ideas have prevailed. Since the end of World War II at the latest, the only role left for the members of the semantical family of the collective mind in social theory and social science is that of a confused notion – and indeed an abominable metaphysical excrescence – from the past, a specter that is effortlessly exorcised by means of a firm commitment to methodological or ontological individualism. Individuals and their mutual relations rather than spooky holistic entities are now seen as the proper object of social science. The only appeal made to such spooky entities is when it comes to justify the individualistic setting of current social theory. Such uses are pervasive in social theory and social science from Max Weber's classical foundation of social science (Weber [1921] 1980) up to the present time. John R. Searle, one of the main protagonists of current social ontology, often mentions the group mind when he comes to characterize the basic traits of his theory. Such conceptions are, Searle claims, "mysterious at best" (Searle 1990: 118), and basically just "perfectly dreadful metaphysical excrescences" (Searle 1998b: 150). To this expression of his deeply felt disgust Searle then adds his commitment to individualism, according to which there cannot be any minds other than those of individuals. There is a routine of declaring the collective mind a terrible idea from the past that is luckily dead and from which current social theory has long parted.

Yet there is another side to the coin. In recent years, there are some new overtones to be heard in the discussion about social ontology and the philosophy of social science. The commitment to one or another form of individualism might still be almost universal, and it is perfectly clear that nobody in the current discussion endorses any of the normative ideas connected to the *Volksgeist* listed above. Yet, in the current struggle for a more adequate understanding of the structure of the social world, there are some ideas around that at first sight at least seem to bear a striking resemblance to some of the other members of the wider family of the collective mind. Leading participants in the contemporary debate, such as Margaret Gilbert, Philip Pettit, or Raimo Tuomela, use terms such as "plural subject" (Gilbert 2000), "groups with minds of their own" (Pettit 2003), or speak, somewhat more cautiously, of "modern counterparts of group minds" (Tuomela 1995: 231). Many philosophers are interested in forms of collective agency that cannot simply be reduced to the agency of the participating individuals. Some philosophers have even started to openly consider the possibility that there is a sense in which personhood might be attributed to collectives in the simple straightforward sense that goes beyond the meaning of corporate personhood in law (e.g., Rovane 1998).

Considering these and other examples, one might ask: is the collective mind really as dead as it seemed? And if it is still alive, or has come back to life in the current debate: what should we make of this fact? Is this yet another effect of some "new collectivism," as diagnosed by Stephen Turner (2004: 386ff.)? And, even more pressingly: what does this recent development mean for the prospects of the *Volksgeist?* Do we have to prepare ourselves for its return, too?

As we have seen, it is not without reason the *Volksgeist* is the most infamous of all conceptions of the collective mind. Yet if so many other members of the family of the collective mind have found their way back into the current debate: what should prevent the return of the *Volksgeist*? Why shouldn't it be expected to be back sometime soon, if so many of its family members already are?

For the reasons mentioned above, this prospect might not seem particularly appealing, and indeed rather frightening. If this is the case, however, it seems that Lazarus' version of the *Volksgeist* would perhaps be the least disagreeable version. It's neither connected to the conservatism of the *Historical School* (Lazarus' views were largely liberal), nor is it in any way in danger to be associated with later Nazi racism in general (Lazarus is above suspicion in that respect) and anti-Semitism in particular (of which Lazarus was an outspoken opponent). So let's have a closer look at Lazarus' concept of *Volksgeist*.

§34 Return of the *Volksgeist?*

Lazarus' effect on later generations does not match the huge success he had with his contemporaries. Not long after his death, Lazarus' work fell into almost total oblivion. It is very remarkable, however, that there is now a new German edition of some selected papers, which appeared in 2003 as volume 551 in Meiner's *Philosophische Bibliothek* series, edited by Klaus Christian Köhnke. In his introduction, the editor does his utmost to make Lazarus' work appealing. In particular, he emphasizes Lazarus' aim to lay a foundation for the scientific study of culture *(Kulturwissenschaft)*. But this venture, too, is directly connected to Lazarus' main conceptual tool. In his view, culture is "objective *Volksgeist*". There is no beating about the bushes here; Lazarus' thinking cannot be advertised without giving that concept a reading that makes it at least half-way presentable. So let's address the core question: what did Lazarus mean by *Volksgeist?*

As emphasized above, Lazarus' concept sticks out from the history of the term in many respects, and it deserves a separate analysis. The following interpretation will be largely based on a passage that has special weight in the context of the whole of Lazarus' work. The passages from which I will quote are taken from the introduction to the first volume of the *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* (which is dated 1860, but appeared in print already in 1859), which Lazarus co-authored with Steinthal.[7] As the introduction to his newly founded journal, this can be considered a programmatic publication indeed. The special importance of this work is also underscored by the fact that Lazarus recycled and further developed large parts of the considerations he presented here later in his life, and he repeated the central passages word for word in a work he published 20 years later.[8] So let's have a closer look at these passages.

Lazarus starts out by saying that *Volksgeist* is "what turns some plurality of individuals into a nation" (EGV: 29). *Volksgeist* is, he says, nothing hovering over and above the heads of the individuals, but rather an "internal bond" (GVK: 12). It becomes immediately clear that Lazarus does not conceive of this bond in terms of

[7] Lazarus and Steinthal (1860), hereafter referred to as EGV. Lazarus co-edited this journal until 1890 (the journal was continued under the title *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde*).

[8] Cf. Lazarus (1880: esp. pp. 5–18).

any external, given factor, but in terms of the attitudes of the individuals involved. Lazarus is as explicit on this as one might wish. The bond, he says, is not a matter of a common past, not a matter of any "shared history", not even a matter of such cultural factors as shared religion, shared customs and conventions, shared language, or of the "same type of housing". People can be united without any of these factors. Indeed, for individuals to form a nation it isn't even necessary that they share the same territory or that they have a "common residence" (GVK: 87). To substantiate his claim that these and other more or less external factors are neither sufficient nor necessary for the unity of a nation, Lazarus gives a list of examples. Throughout his career, Lazarus has continually laid emphasis on the fact that the unity of a nation is compatible with vast differences in provenance, cultural origins and influences, religious and linguistic orientation. He does so in his programmatic paper as well as 20 years later in his contribution to the so-called *Berliner Antisemitismusstreit*. In 1879, Lazarus gives a talk at the *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Berlin (which was established just a few years earlier based on Lazarus' own initiative). The title of the talk is a question: "What does *national* mean?" In this talk (which was published as a small brochure), Lazarus repeats his earlier thoughts on the ontology of the *Volksgeist*. In this context, the considerations concerning the space for plurality within the unity of the *Volksgeist* appear even more important. Following the same line of reasoning, and continuing to argue against pervasive monolithic constructions of the concept of nation, Lazarus emphasizes that individuals can have more than one nationality (WHN: 17). Indeed there is a further, and more general thesis in the background of this claim, a thesis concerning the relation between the individual and his or her group (nations and other collectives) in general. According to that thesis, multiple group membership is not just a conceptual *possibility*, but plays a constitutive role for the *individuality* of the members of these groups. On the sub-national level at least, it is not just possible, but even *essential* for an individual to be a member of different groups (cf. e.g. GVK: 50). This thesis is known under a label which Lazarus' most famous student Georg Simmel attached to it: "the intersection [or cross-cutting] of social circles" (Simmel [1908] 1983: 305–344).

Based on these few characteristics, it seems safe to say that Lazarus' *Volksgeist* is no monolithic or even uniformist idea; and quite obviously, it in not a matter of contingent givens or of any adventitious stigmata either. In a sense, even the talk of the "being" or "ontology" of the nation is misleading. According to Lazarus, there *is* no nation. The unity of the nation is always a *process*, and not a matter of any substance (EGV: 27; WHN: 13). Lazarus adds that this is the reason why he chooses the term *Volksgeist* rather than *Volksseele* (the *soul* of the nation).[9] Moreover, the

[9] "Wenngleich nun aber auch eine Substanz des Volksgeistes, eine substanzielle Seele desselben nicht erfordert wird, um die Gesetze seiner Tätigkeit zu begreifen, so müssen wir doch jedenfalls den Begriff des Subjects als einer bestimmten Einheit feststellen, um von ihm etwas prädiciren zu können" (GVK: 11). This brings Lazarus into sharp contrast with Wilhelm Wundt. Wundt claims the Volksseele to be the object of his Völkerpsychologie, because by contrast to the spirit or mind *(Geist)*, the soul is embodied (especially in cultural artefacts; cf. Wundt [1900: 7]).

process in question – which in a sense *is* the nation – is constituted from the *participants' perspective*, not from any observer's point of view. This is an insight that is so important to Lazarus that he repeats it on several occasions: "[the unity of a nation] is a mental product of its members" (EGV: 36; GVK: 89). The constitution of the nation is due to a kind of a reflexive self-categorization, in which the individuals take themselves to be members of the nation.

> What makes a nation a nation lies in [...] the subjective view of the members of that nation, who *see themselves* as a nation. The concept of a nation is predicated on the nation's members' subjective view of themselves. (EGV: 34–35; GVK: 88)

Thus it is clear that the unity of a nation is not a matter of an irreducible collective substance. In Lazarus' thinking, *Volksgeist* is simply the title for the process of the individual members' subjective self-categorization. To use the expression proposed by Benedict Anderson in his influential analysis of the concept of the nation, it seems that, in Lazarus' view, nations are simply "imagined communities". Indeed, the similarity between Lazarus' view and Anderson's is striking. Anderson's central concept of "imagination", just as Lazarus' *Volksgeist*, is ultimately a matter of self-reflection and self-interpretation.[10]

But why, then, choose the term *Volksgeist*, which seems to ascribe the mind or spirit in question to the nation rather than to its individual members? An influential and particularly piercing critique of the assumption of the *Volksgeist* was put forward by Wilhelm Dilthey, a long-time friend of Lazarus', who in 1866 aspired to Lazarus' succession at the University of Berne,[11] but then accepted a call to the University of Basel that same year. At the core of Dilthey's critique of the *Volksgeist*, which was not directed against Lazarus' version, is the claim that, for there to be mind, there has to be some self-awareness, but since there cannot be anything like *self-awareness* on the collective level, it does not make sense to credit collectives with any form of mind of their own (Dilthey 1923: 31). Superficially, Lazarus seems to disagree with Dilthey's view. For him, collective self-awareness is no less than the "core" of the *Volksgeist* (GVK: 91), and thus the point of reference for the whole of *Kulturwissenschaft*. Lazarus explicitly states that collective self-awareness is the "most essential element for the definition of a nation" (GVK: 83): "just like each individual, each nation has self-awareness of its own, through which it becomes a particular nation, just like the former becomes a particular person" (GVK: 89). Yet Lazarus makes it immediately clear that the only place for this seemingly mysterious "self-awareness of the nation" is exclusively "in the mind [*Gemüth*] of the individuals" (loc. cit.). The self-reference of the collective is not a matter of some mind hovering over and above the single individuals, but the very act of self-categorization of the participating individuals as encountered above.

In other words: the mysterious "self-awareness of the nation", again, is simply a matter of the attitudes and perspectives of the participating individuals. If we follow

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[10] Anderson quotes approvingly from Hugh Seton-Watson: "All that I can find to say is that a nation exists when a significant number of people in a community consider themselves to form a nation" (Anderson 1991: 6).

[11] Cf. Dilthey's letter to Lazarus in Lazarus and Steinthal (1986: 786).

this line of thought further (though there are some passages in Lazarus' work that do not seem to fit into this view),[12] it seems that, behind the specter of the *Volksgeist*, there is an ontology of the collective that is solidly individualistic. Lazarus' view of the *Volksgeist* is fully compatible with Max Weber's later conception that has been of so much influence on later thought. Just as in Weber's methodology, collectives come into play only as parts of the content of the intentional attitudes of the individuals. Collectives exist only because individuals (in Lazarus' version: its individual members) *think* that they exist, or *take* them to exist.

Though the term *Volksgeist* has since fallen into disrepute, the conception behind the term has been of tremendous influence and success, even if it is very rarely ascribed to Lazarus. In the current literature, this conception is usually credited to Lazarus' student Georg Simmel. In his famous '*Digression on the Question: How is Society Possible*?' Simmel derives the unity of social groups from the consciousness of unity of its individual members (Simmel [1908] 1983: 21ff.). *Via* Simmel, this idea has become part of the classical canon of ideas in social theory and social science. Through Simmel, this idea still influences the current debate. Margaret Gilbert, whose ontology of social facts is among the most discussed in the current debate, directly relies on Simmel, calling her view of the ontology of groups "Simmelian" (Gilbert 1989: 146–246). It should not be forgotten that behind Simmel's view is the concept of *Volksgeist* as analyzed by Simmel's teacher Moritz Lazarus.[13]

If some of the core ideas of Gilbert's Plural Subject Theory follow in direct succession from the *Volksgeist*, this does not compromise the theory, because the kind of *Volksgeist* that is at issue here seems to be entirely free of any of the horrors that are usually associated with this concept. By contrast to other versions of the *Volksgeist*, Lazarus' version is of the pluralistic, subjectivist, and individualist kind. It seems that here, *Volksgeist* is by no means a matter of some pre-determined fate or destiny. It is not in conflict with the modern individualistic conviction that the substance of the social – if there is any – is a matter of the individuals and their mutual relations. *Volksgeist* does not limit individual autonomy, since it is *based* on the subjective attitudes of the individuals. Also, according to this notion, nobody seems to be *excluded* from the nation but those who exclude *themselves* by not taking

[12] Thus Eduard von Hartmann, in his analysis of the "Essence of the Whole", quotes a passage (of which he approves) from Lazarus' work, according to which, in modern terminology, the Volksgeist should be seen as a matter of the unintended consequences of individual action, rather than as a matter of the intentional content of individual attitudes: "each one does, what he does, immediately only for himself. Nevertheless, all individuals form a unity through their labour, even unknowingly and unwillingly. This unity consists of real, concrete, and often influential causal relations, that are objectively revealed in the actions of the individuals, only that they elude the individual's awareness, his intentions, and goals" (Lazarus quoted in: von Hartmann [1871: 28ff.]). Here, the *Volksgeist* is a matter of the invisible hand rather than the content of individual self-categorization. The two readings do not seem to square, and I know of no remarks from Lazarus' side of how to relate the two. For reasons quoted above, I think that the self-categorization view of *Volksgeist* should be considered the more important reading.

[13] On Lazarus' influence on Simmel see Köhnke (1996), esp. pp. 386ff. For a somewhat more cautious assessment of that influence see Canto i Mila (2002).

themselves to be its members. Thus there seems to be nothing unduly exclusive or collectivist anymore about the *Volksgeist*. Rather, the *Volksgeist* here seems to take on a completely different, a participatory, indeed a liberal-communitarian hue. Paraphrasing Lazarus, one could say that the *Volksgeist* is about cultivating our shared self-understanding. This is why the *Volksgeist* is never just there, never just given or fixed, nothing pre-determined, but always to be created and to be maintained within the process of continuing reflexive re-interpretation. Thus it becomes obvious that Lazarus' *Volksgeist* contains a view of *collective identity* that is widespread in the current literature. According to this view, collective identity is the "capacity of individuals to declare themselves the community which they are and which they want to be, always anew and afresh."[14] In other words: the *Volksgeist* is but another label for what one could call the *reflexive* account of collective identity.[15] It comes as no surprise that the editor of the new edition of Lazarus' collected papers lays special emphasis on these traits of Lazarus' psychology of nations (GVK: ix–xi). In the light of these considerations, Lazarus' conception of the *Volksgeist* seems surprisingly acceptable, indeed even appealing.

In the remainder of this chapter, I would like to question this positive assessment of Lazarus' *Volksgeist*. In the next section, I will argue against the reflexive view of collective identity, and I will show how the study of Lazarus' work can help us to understand the flaws and limitations of this view. This is important because this view of social identity predominates in current social theory. If there is a problem with Lazarus' *Volksgeist*, this is not *in spite* but *because* of its appeal to current views of collective identity.

§35 Lazarus' *Volksgeist*: Some Problems

If the *Volksgeist* is compatible with the reflexive account of collective identity that is so frequent in current literature, and that seems to be free of any fatalism, collectivism and exclusivity, does that mean that this concept (if not the word) is without problems? I will argue that the answer should be in the negative. As I will try to show, Lazarus' theory of the *Volksgeist* is not just surprisingly modern. It can also help us to see some *problematic consequences of the modern reflexive conception of social identity* that are overlooked in much of the current debate. If Lazarus' notion of *Volksgeist* is surprisingly modern, this should not simply be seen as an

[14] Cf. Tietz (2002: 77, 150, 207).

[15] Following are some current examples for this reflexive line of theorizing collective identity. A particularly prominent example is Tamir (1996), esp. pp. 176–177. Tamir's emphasis, too, is on the fact that identity is changeable. Tamir, too, bases identity on a reflexive self-reference of the individual members: "The quest for identity (. . .) is marked by self-reflection, by the readiness of individuals to make radical changes in the way they perceive themselves" (loc. cit.). Another example is "Social Identity Theory": "Social identity is self-conception as a group member" (Abrams and Hogg 1990: 2ff.). Another example is Matthiesen (2003). For a critique of these reflexive accounts of social identity cf. Schmid (2005c, 2005d).

advantage, but also as one of its problems. Studying Lazarus' *Volksgeist* thus can teach us a lesson. This lesson I believe to be so important that it should be considered one of the foremost reasons why studying Lazarus' work can still be rewarding.

In a first step, Lazarus makes clear some of the logical consequences of his theory of *Volksgeist*. The point of departure is this. If a nation is *constituted* by the respective individuals' taking themselves to be its members, this self-categorization has to be considered *infallible*. As Lazarus says, the social self-consciousness can "never be mistaken" (EGV: 36; GVK: 90). If individuals *take themselves* to be a nation, they simply *are* a nation, because the *being* of a nation, conceived of in terms of a process, is that of these individual attitudes. If this is true, this has further consequences for the analysis of collectives in social science. The main consequence is that the analysis has to follow individual self-categorization. Lazarus finds the following words for this:

> As far as plants and animals are concerned, it is the *scientist's task* to categorize them according to the objective features of the species; by contrast to this, we have to *ask* human beings, to which nation they *count themselves*. [...] We have to elucidate the subjective definitions that nations tacitly (*implicite*) give of themselves. (EGV: 35; GVK: 88; WHN: 13)

In contrast to the natural sciences, epistemic authority in the social sciences lies with the *objects of analysis*, and not with the scientist. For all the democratic and participatory flair of this account, however, there is also a problem to be considered here. At least on a conceptual level, it seems quite important to see that reflexive self-image and lived community are two different things. Why should the question whether or not the most relevant collective entities are those of which the participating individuals are aware be considered a settled matter *a priori*? Why not leave open the *conceptual possibility* that our reflexive self-categorization misses those forms of communal life that are most essential to our societies? Could it not be the case that we (as a community, or as a nation) have long ceased to *be* the community, or nation, which we still *take ourselves* to be? Could it not be the case that unbeknownst to ourselves, we have become a different community, or nation, i.e. that our communal self-awareness misses our actual communal being?

Be that as it may, the problem is that there is simply no conceptual room for such questions if we follow the reflexive theory of collective identity. And Lazarus, with his declaration of infallibility of the collective self-awareness, has made this consequence clear. As we shall see, the fact that among all types of collectives, Lazarus' theory is about *nations*, makes this consequence particularly difficult to accept. The reason why Lazarus' concentrates on the *Volksgeist* rather than on the mind or spirit of any other collective is that he thinks that the nation is, as he says, the "most essential" form of social life (EGV: 5).[16] On one occasion, Lazarus captures this thought in an admirably ambiguous statement: "the form of the common life of humanity is

[16] Later on, Wilhelm Wundt gives a similar answer to the question why social psychology should be psychology of nations, rather than psychology of any other kind of collective: "the nation is the most important among the circles of life (Lebenskreise) from which the products of mental life emerge" (Wundt 1900: 3).

its being divided into nations" (GVK: 52). Yet in view of rapid social change and globalization we have to consider the above questions in all earnestness. Could it not be the case that, in a given historical situation (especially ours), the concept of a nation still predominates in our self-categorization, while having long lost some or most of its relevance on the level of social reality? What if, unbeknownst to us, social reality has become *post-national*, to quote one of Jürgen Habermas' titles? In my view, we should leave room for this, if only in terms of a *conceptual* possibility. But this presupposes what Lazarus denies: in modern terms, it presupposes that it is *conceptually possible* to distinguish between social *self-description* and actual *social structure*. It is well possible that our communal or collective self-consciousness is mistaken. Identifying collectivity with awareness of collectivity, as is done in Lazarus' conception and so many more current theories of collective identity, means to short-circuit things that should be carefully kept separate. It means reducing social theory to a kind of hermeneutics of self-categorization, and this means barring the prospects of a *critical role* for social theory (and theory of society). Social theory is not simply hermeneutics. It is *critique*, too. And in a critical perspective, social theory might not only teach us that our self-categorization and the actual structure of our societies might diverge. More than that, it might teach us that this divergence is of systematic character. An example of this view can be found in the work of the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann. Luhmann's suspicion that motivates most of the huge body of his work is that the structure of our societies has greatly changed, leaving the semantics of our societal self-description far behind. Luhmann argues that the main problem in social sciences is this very gulf which has opened up between social structure on the one hand and the semantics of societal self-description on the other. Our thinking about the social, that still follows the old categories, has simply lost contact with actual social reality that is so rapidly evolving.[17]

Even if the rift between self-understanding and social structure is not quite as deep as Luhmann conjectures, or even if there is no *actual* rift at all, it is not obvious why this should be ruled out *a priori*, i.e. on conceptual grounds, as is done in the reflexive approach. Lazarus and his followers may be right in claiming that social identities cannot be determined purely from the outside perspective. But it should also be considered that the participant's perspective might not always be right, and the ultimate epistemic authority either. Indeed in view of the darker chapters of the history of the *Volksgeist*, one might even think that the more the spirit of a group is conjured up within a group, the less it is real as a living community. If this is true, the connection between the community and the awareness of community might be exactly the reverse. The more insistently and decidedly we try to see ourselves as members of a community, the louder our appeals to the community spirit, the less likely it becomes that there actually *is* a community.[18]

Contrary to what Lazarus thinks, collective self-consciousness is not infallible. Sometimes it is not really *us*, the "we", whom we are conscious of, because there is

[17] Luhmann's systems theory sets itself the task to close this gulf. Cf. Schmid (2000: 124ff.).

[18] This is a lesson taught by Martin Heidegger, who has learned it the hard way himself (see Heidegger [1938/39] 1997: 329).

no such thing as a "we". Social self-consciousness does not *constitute* a community. Rather, it *presupposes* community. The existence of a community is what makes our belief that we are its members true, and not the other way around. If individuals see themselves as members of a team, they assume that this assumption is justified to the degree that they really *are* a team. Thus the very structure of collective self-consciousness defies any attempt to use it as the base of social ontology. Self-categorization presupposes membership, and not the other way around. Lazarus' approach, just as those current approaches to social identity that follow the reflexive line, are simply circular. If some form of intentional states is what constitutes collectives, these collectives cannot be presupposed in the intentional *content* of the mental states in question.

Therefore it seems that we have reached an impasse. What makes the encounter with Lazarus' theory so rewarding, however, is that he not only spells out the implications of a reflexive account of social identity. He is even aware of the consequences I just mentioned. Lazarus quickly adds to his definition of a nation as a "crowd of human beings who take themselves to be a nation" the observation that this definition contains a "logical error" (GVK: 88, EGV: 35). Collectives cannot be born out of their own heads, as it were. If collective self-awareness is consciousness *of* the community *by* its individual members, the existence of the collective is presupposed in collective self-awareness. By contrast to some current philosophers and social theorists who gladly accept any charges of circularity and inconsistency, Lazarus is far too serious a thinker just to let the matter rest at that. So how does he resolve the problem? Lazarus confronts it in an attempt to break this circularity. The way he does so, however, is rather telling. Lazarus now claims that it is not really the *collective itself* that is the content of the intentional state that constitutes a collective. Rather, the consciousness in question is always based "on such objective factors such as origin, language, etc." (GVK: 89ff.). It is true that Lazarus quickly adds that these objective factors are not what is most important about the *Volksgeist*, which continues to be the "subjective and free act of self-conception as a unit and as *one* nation" (loc. cit.). But still, the consequences of Lazarus' breaking the circle by appealing to objective factors are grave, to say the least. Now, there does not seem to be much leeway left for the subjective and free act of self-categorization anymore. The subjective act of self-categorization is bound to grasp those objective factors that are already there, pre-consciously and pre-politically, as it were. It seems that with this move, the *Volksgeist* reveals its exclusive face again. It is not a matter of spontaneous self-invention, of shared imagination anymore, but tied to those very objective factors which Lazarus rejected so vehemently in his original definition of the nation. It seems that all claims to the contrary notwithstanding, the *Volksgeist* is ultimately a matter of fate rather than a matter of initiative, a matter of origin instead of a matter of spontaneous, free, and sometimes border-bridging joint practices, projects, and initiatives.

The first book which Lazarus published – it came out in 1850 – was a defense of German national unity under Prussian hegemony. In a sense, this beginning is significant for Lazarus' published work in general, and his theory of the *Volksgeist* in particular. Lazarus' theory of the *Volksgeist* is deeply connected with the question

of German national unity, and this is its historical place. The question is: beyond history, is there anything this conception of the *Volksgeist* could teach us today? Is there any possible use connected to this concept for the denizens of a social world which Jürgen Habermas (1998) has labeled *post-national*? Or should we simply leave Lazarus' work to the history of ideas? I think the above considerations show that there is a point to be made in favor of a continuing or renewed dialogue with Lazarus. There is indeed something that can be learned from Lazarus' theory of the *Volksgeist* that transcends history. But this lesson can be learned only if we are prepared to see what Lazarus' ultimate failure teaches us about the problems of *our own conception* of social identity first. And this is a lesson many might not like to learn.

It is obvious that, in spite of all appeals to a liberal, participatory conception, some traits of Lazarus' *Volksgeist* point towards the darker chapters in the history of that concept. Here, too, the *Volksgeist* reveals its exclusivist features. Thus the editor of the multi-volume Lazarus-Steinthal correspondence even judges that there is a certain amount of chauvinism in Lazarus' thinking on the *Volksgeist* that all but matches the chauvinism of his opponent in the *Berliner Antisemitismusstreit*, Heinrich von Treitschke (cf. Belke 1971: lxxi). In the sparse literature on the topic, some form of negative assessment is almost universal, even though, in view of the given references, some of the statements seem overly harsh.[19] Independently of how much weight these tendencies have in Lazarus' thought, however, it seems clear that the most important result of the above reading of Lazarus' theory of the *Volksgeist* is the following. If Lazarus' conception of the *Volksgeist* is problematic right down to its core, this is not because it is incompatible with any form of individualism. As far as the passages on which I have based my reading are concerned at least, Lazarus' conception is thoroughly individualistic. The problem of this conception does not lie in any of the tendencies usually associated with the *Volksgeist*. Lazarus' *Volksgeist* does not displace individual agency, it does not bypass the theoretical, practical and affective attitudes of the participating individuals as the base of social ontology. Rather, the problem is that Lazarus narrows the relevant kinds of attitudes to *reflexive forms* of consciousness. This is epitomized in Lazarus' claim that social unities exist insofar and only insofar as its members see themselves as its members. This conception is circular, and Lazarus believes that this circularity can only be avoided by basing the *Volksgeist* on objective factors, which leads back into the problems usually associated with the term.[20] If any of the ideas associated with Lazarus' *Volksgeist* should turn out to be of use to us at all, it is clear that this has to come at the price of a radical reconceptualization that involves loosening the tight ideas of unity that are at play in Lazarus' theory.

Let me briefly point out how this could be done. I think that Lazarus is right in emphasizing the subjective over the objective, and in diagnosing the logical

[19] Cf. e.g. Schneider (1990: 68ff.).

[20] Indeed, in a certain sense, Lazarus' individualism rather than any collectivism is at the heart of the problems of his account. Thus Wilhelm Wundt criticized Lazarus' concept of the Volksgeist as a "projection of the individual mind on the larger scale" (Wundt 1900: 19).

problems associated with reflexive notions of social identity. The problem is that he takes the wrong turn to avoid the circle, taking a path that leads him back towards the exclusive conceptions of social unity which he originally tried to avoid. If Lazarus is right in emphasizing the fundamental role of the attitudes of the participating individuals, his mistake is to concentrate on *reflexive* attitudes, i.e. those individual attitudes that involve some self-categorization. There are pre-reflexive forms of intentional attitudes that are relevant to our communal lives, of which we may not be reflexively aware. Indeed it may well be that our self-understanding misses the kind and content of our pre-reflexive attitudes. Sometimes, what people think, do, and feel, is not exactly what they take themselves to be thinking, doing, and feeling. And many of these pre-reflexive attitudes are *shared*.[21] These, and not any reflexive forms of consciousness, should be considered the base of social ontology.

If we follow this line of thought further, many insights which can be learned from Lazarus become important. Among the lessons to be learned is Lazarus' insistence on the role of plurality of membership, and its significance for our individuality. In this context, Lazarus develops a critique of a distorted view of social unity, that was as wide-spread in his day as it is now, and that is even part of the very word "collective". As Lazarus remarks, standard analyses of social unities usually start out with the assumption of fully developed individuals with all their psychological qualities, their personality, their beliefs and preferences, and then go on to conceive of collectives as something that is *composed* of these individuals. Here is what Lazarus has to say about this line of analysis:

> While appearing just to express the facts, this view implies a tremendous mistake: those qualities and relations of the mental life and that content of the inner being are not inherent to the individuals, conceived of as single beings. Only in social contexts, i.e. only insofar their lives are shared [...] do these individuals acquire and possess the content even of their individual lives. To think of humans in abstraction of their sociality, to conceive of them as bare single beings [...] would be a mere fiction that contradicts all facts. (GVK: 81ff.)

This critique anticipates much of what is now discussed under Philip Pettit's label *Common Mind* (cf. Pettit 1996: esp. 111ff.). Lazarus criticizes an *atomistic* view, and argues for a *holistic* understanding of the relation between the individuals and collectives. Yet clearly, his rejection of a view that always takes the individual to be ready-made, as it were, does not as such entail the slightest denunciation of individual autonomy. Quite to the contrary, a more holistic view is the *condition* of positing the autonomous individual as the "purpose of community", as Lazarus says explicitly (GVK: 113).

Thus we might conclude that Lazarus' *Volksgeist* has very different, indeed incompatible traits. Among the more somber features is the vehemency with which Lazarus, 2 years after the defeat of the revolution of 1848, insisted on the role of German unity, which he seemed to value much more highly than democracy and

[21] For a more detailed account cf. Schmid (2005c).

individual liberty.[22] Under the title *Volksgeist*, national unity is once again preferred to a republican constitution. Yet there is a counter-tendency even to that to be found in Lazarus' work. Lazarus' decision to accept a call to a Swiss university was not only motivated in the sad fact that, as a Jew, he had no prospect of ever becoming a full professor in Germany. As Lazarus recounts in his autobiography, there was a positive motivation behind that move, too. He went to Switzerland – which under the influence of liberal democrats only recently (1848) had adopted a new federalist constitution – "to study the republican life of a nation".[23]

[22] Cf. Lazarus (1850: 50); see also Belke (1971: xlviii).

[23] Lazarus, Nahida (1910: 99). Nahida Lazarus suggests that her husband modeled his view of the relation between individual and community on the Swiss form of government (cf. ibid.: 54ff.).