

## REVIEWS

Arvidsson, Stefan. *Aryan Idols: Indo-European Mythology as Ideology and Science*. Translated by Sonia Wichmann. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. Bibliography. Index. 354 pp. \$55.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-226-02860-6.

*Aryan Idols*, Stefan Arvidsson's impressive historiography of the "Indo-European discourse," seeks to de-mythologize that discourse. "Myth transforms history into fate," he writes; "historiography reveals -- in the best case -- fate as the result of decisions made" (322). Arvidsson traces the "decisions made" over the 200-plus years that stretch between the discovery of the Indo-European language family by Sir William "Oriental" Jones in 1786 and the ideological and academic turf wars of today. He speculates provocatively about the underlying motives and long-term consequences of those decisions. His project is ambitious, and his summary is useful and often thought-provoking.

Arvidsson's study begins with an epigraph from Friedrich Nietzsche's *Die Götzen-Dämmerung*: "There are more idols than realities in the world." The particular idols Arvidsson pursues are the intellectual constructions of "Indo-European" in the service of both modern "science" and modern "idol-ology." In the course of five detailed chapters, Arvidsson unpacks two centuries of what he calls the "Indo-European discourse" and addresses the fundamental issue: while positing prehistoric peoples such as the Indo-Europeans is, "to use the words of Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'good to think with'" (Arvidsson writes), we must still admit to certain critical facts: the Indo-Europeans "have not left behind any texts, no objects can be definitely tied to them, nor do we know any 'Indo-European' by name" (xi). What, then, besides the temptations of imagination encouraged by a paucity of concrete documentation, explains the evolution, influence, and longevity of the "idols" created by the Indo-European discourse? Arvidsson responds to the question by methodically analyzing the academic dialogue of ideas and agendas that contributed to the discourse from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day.

Arvidsson chronologically traces the various Indo-European "models" and their advocates through their historical transmutations: 1) the early linguistic and cultural models of William Jones and Thomas Young, which introduced Indo-European as a superior language type with a shadow cultural model; this view was supported by the Romantic

ideal and the notion of the *Volksseele*; 2) Friedrich Max Müller's comparative religion and "nature mythology" model, which viewed the Indo-Europeans as spiritually sophisticated and linguistically superior; 3) Jules Michelet's and Ernest Renan's model of the Indo-European as Europe's indigenous answer to the outdated moral and cultural ideals of Judeo-Christianity, whose roots lay in the Middle East; 4) the racial anthropology model, which promoted the Indo-Europeans as an evolved master race with superior physical characteristics -- a point of view ostensibly supported by materialism, positivism, and physiological research; Darwinism later added its own spin to an evolutionist model of the Indo-European discourse, while the development of ethnology and folklore as disciplinary fields added a new dimension to the modern European understanding of nationalism and identity; 5) the Nazis' Vitalist model, which emphasized the Indo-European's superior stamina, vitality, love of this life, and acceptance of the world -- a counterbalance to perceived social "degeneration," the *jenseits* focus of Judeo-Christianity, and the "inferiority" of other races; 6) the speculative post-war models of Georges Dumézil and Marija Gimbutas, and the ideological struggles among more recent scholars who strive to retain or take control of the discourse. Here Arvidsson commends the work of Bruce Lincoln as a counterbalance to prevailing Indo-European scholarship. Lincoln's historicism, re-examination of terms, and disciplinary critique have, in Arvidsson's view, "tried to once and for all topple all Indo-European, Indo-German, and Aryan idols" (308).

Arvidsson locates the Indo-European discourse within the history of national, religious, ideological, class, and political beliefs held by educated, middle-class, European males over the course of two centuries: "The epic about the Aryan has in many ways been an epic about bourgeois ideals, and it has also gone hand in hand with the ideological changes of this class" (318). By "bourgeois ideals" Arvidsson means the ideals of the "educated bourgeoisie," the middle-class professors in their Germanic-style universities. So "Indo-European research has, in many ways, been an attempt to write the origin narrative of the [educated] bourgeois class -- a narrative that, by talking about how things originally were, has sanctioned a certain kind of behavior, idealized a certain type of persona, and affirmed certain feelings" (319-320).

Arvidsson reminds the reader that the academy has lived with the Indo-European discourse long enough for some scholars to assume that it must be based on scientific fact. In spite of the limitations of factual knowledge of Indo-Europeans, for many scholars "the Indo-Europeans'

exist in the same way that birches or houses do, and not in the same way as, for example, ‘the Orient,’ ‘atoms,’ or ‘paleolithicum’ [i.e., the Paleolithic]; that is to say, [for many scholars the Indo-Europeans exist] not as objects that have been named and created by and for research, and whose right to existence is dependent on a number of (in the best case scenario) clearly formulated criteria and questions,” but as a physical and historical entity in their own right (252-53). Scholars have come to assume that there actually was an identifiable group of people who shared “Indo-European” language and thereby shared culture, religion, and even racial characteristics; that their “Indo-European-ness” was crucial to understanding their values and belief system; that these values and beliefs differed significantly from Jewish/Semitic or Judeo-Christian paradigms.

Arvidsson’s summary of ideas and polemics dispels such assumptions and reveals the manner in which the Indo-European discourse was a construct, worked on by different ideologies over modern time and across European space. Arvidsson’s point is precisely that the Indo-European discourse is not a proven constellation of facts, but an artificial discourse created by scholars to provide a platform for, among other things, intellectual speculation about origins, identity, self-esteem, knowledge, belonging, and class. It is a scholarly “tool,” not a scientific “fact.”

At the start of his historiography Arvidsson (who does not fear the I-word) asked “whether there is something in the nature of research about Indo-Europeans that makes it especially prone to ideological abuse” (3); by the end of his study, he has presented a convincing argument that there must be. He explains, in considerable detail, the manner in which the Indo-European discourse began with idealist, humanist, liberal, and progressive ideas, but became increasingly materialist, positivist, traditional, and finally reactionary. The Indo-European discourse was the creation of an “Aryan myth,” a scientific, erudite myth that required the collaboration of linguistics, mythology, comparative religions, anthropology, folklore, archaeology, and cultural history. The lines between myth and ideology and science and ideology are not clearly drawn: ideology shapes even “scientific” scholarship. Arvidsson’s study reveals how fuzzy the lines are in the Indo-European case -- and his work serves to remind all scholars of the limitations imposed on interpretation and understanding by history, individual and collective beliefs, and human desire.

This brief review cannot do justice to the many issues that Arvidsson raises -- not only about our understanding of what the Indo-European discourse is, but also about why it exists and in what terms and contexts. He is aware that, as a scholar, he is as much molded by his own age and its philosophies and rivalries as Max Müller was molded by liberal Protestantism, or Renan by French anti-clericalism, or Mircea Eliade by early Nazi sympathies, or Dumézil by French Fascist theory, or Gimbutas by her feminism and anti-Sovietism. "Of course, the closer we come to our own time the harder it is to see how ideologies -- in which we ourselves swim around -- affect the truth seeking that strives for objectivity and persuasive evidence" (292). Arvidsson himself swims to some degree in Marxism (albeit not in any dogmatic way). His study is a useful contribution to the "house-cleaning" of the discourse first proposed by Bruce Lincoln. Part of the growing critique of Indo-European scholarship, his work exposes prevailing assumptions, documents and summarizes the discourse, and opens provocative new perspectives on the troublesome but perpetually fascinating concept of the Indo-European.

Two final comments: First, Arvidsson makes assumptions about his readers' knowledge base. This is not a book for general readers who want to know what the Indo-European discourse is, but for readers who think that they already know. It is dense, but it rewards effort. Second, readers should be alert to occasional infelicities of translation, especially from German, and the odd typo. These do not detract from an otherwise competent translation, although the reader should pay particular attention to the use of "modern," "modernism," "modernist," and "modernity" -- these are not identical concepts (in spite of their sharing an Indo-European root).

Maria Carlson,  
University of Kansas  
Lawrence  
Kansas  
USA