

A Detailed Look at Stefan Arvidsson's *Aryan Idols*

by Maria Carlson

Professor of Slavic Languages & Literatures
University of Kansas

Aryan Idols, Stefan Arvidsson's impressive historiography of the "Indo-European discourse," courageously takes on the task of de-mythologizing that discourse and looking anew at its past influences and its present (and future) implications.¹ "Myth transforms history into fate," he writes; "historiography reveals -- in the best case -- fate as the result of decisions made" (322). Arvidsson meticulously traces the "decisions made" from the discovery of the Indo-European language family by Sir William "Oriental" Jones in 1786 to the ideological and academic turf wars of today. He speculates provocatively about the underlying motives and long-term consequences of the decisions that Indo-European scholars have made over the course of 200 years. His project is ambitious, timely, and thought-provoking. It also offers a much-needed reminder of the perils posed when science gets into bed with ideology.² Science and ideology, he concludes, have never been as compartmentalized as scientists often like to pretend, and so they should anticipate unexpected consequences -- as the Indo-European discourse has demonstrated.

Arvidsson's detailed study begins with an epigraph from Nietzsche's *Die Götzen-Dämmerung*: "There are more idols than realities in the world." His choice of philosopher, epigraph, and title make clear which idols Arvidsson has in mind. His quarry is the intellectual construction of "the Indo-European" in the service of, let us say, both modern "science" and modern "idology" as the European mind formulated them. He reminds us that, while positing prehistoric peoples such as the Proto-Indo-Europeans is, "to use the words of Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'good to think with,'" we must still admit to certain critical facts: the Proto-Indo-Europeans "have not left behind any texts, no objects can be definitely tied to them, nor do we know any 'Indo-

1 Stefan Arvidsson. *Aryan Idols: Indo-European Mythology as Ideology and Science*. Translated by Sonia Wichmann. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. 354 pp. \$55.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-226-02860-6. All citations are from this volume; page numbers are provided in parentheses.

2 In this essay, I use "science" in its broadest sense of *scientia*, *knowledge*, *наука*. Humanists and social scientists are not let off this hook.

European' by name" (xi). What, then, besides the temptations of imagination made possible by a paucity of concrete documentation, explains the influence, longevity, and ideological trajectories of the idols that the "Indo-European discourse" raised and worshipped? Arvidsson answers this question in *Aryan Idols* methodically, analyzing the academic dialogue of ideas and agendas that formed the discourse.

In five chapters, Arvidsson surveys the Indo-European discourse from its inception. He describes the new "Indomania" that swept Europe in the late 18th and early 19th centuries: he traces the roots of Indo-European linguistics in William Jones and Thomas Young and the stem of Indo-European mythology in Herder and German Romanticism. He shows how the Indo-European discourse was shaped by counter-Enlightenment and Romantic thought, by growing English imperialism, by French response to the power of ecclesiastical Christianity, and by the new Germanic identity that was forged between the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806 and German unification in 1871. He carefully tracks the Indo-European discourse's increasingly strident challenges to both the perceived "creative center" of the Judaeo-Christian dominant of Western culture and to the Hebrew claim to stand at the "origins of history," as described in the Bible.

With sympathy, Arvidsson surveys the centrality of the Oxford don from Germany, the orientalist Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900), whose cocktail of comparative philology, culture, religion, and nature mythology dominated the Indo-European discourse for a significant part of the mid-19th century. He examines the contributions to the discourse of French intellectuals and explains why Jules Michelet (1798-1874) and Ernest Renan (1823-1892) employed the discourse to respond to Catholicism's ecclesiastical Christianity and to perceived Jewish (cultural) and Semitic (racial) challenges to European culture. In Michelet and Renan's discourses, the Indo-European emerges as a self-governing, rational, secularized individual, while the Semite becomes his collective, fanatic opposite (94-96).³

Arvidsson's book tackles the issues of race head-on, but not without awareness of the dangers inherent in projecting 21st century knowledge and experience (especially the experience of Nazi ideology and its consequences, theoretical and actual) onto 19th century polemics. He points out that, in their own context, "Michelet's, Quinet's, and Renan's struggle against 'Semitic mentality' and Judeo-Christian religiosity was a struggle against dogmatism, irrationalism, and conservatism, and for science, secular law-making, and education" (108). But Arvidsson also points out that, over the course of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Indo-European discourse

3 The most common "others" (non-Aryan or "anti-Aryan") in the Indo-European discourse have been, at various times, Dravidians, the indigenous, pre-Indo-European populations of Europe, and Semites.

would accommodate a multiplicity of other discourses, never overtly identified by their constituencies: justification of colonialism, expression of religious, ethnic, and racial prejudices, nationalism, anti-clericalism, and even fear of modernity. These are volatile issues indeed, but the particular evolution of the Indo-European discourse allowed them to be safely “displaced” from potentially dangerous social and political arenas into a relatively safer academic space where they could be discussed in an “objective” and gentleman-like manner by erudite professors.

Next Arvidsson tackles the alternative Indo-European model proposed by the emergence of racial and evolutionary anthropology. The emergence of anthropology as an academic discipline pitted a new “Aryan naturalism” against the prevailing liberal “Aryan romanticism” (105-106), which had been rooted in the disciplines of linguistics and philology.⁴ In the last third of the 19th century, European anthropologists, basing their theories on developments in physiological science, archaeology, material culture, and geography, were ready to rank “other” races from the superior perspective of their own. The racial anthropologists projected good, noble, and manly traits onto the “Indo-Europeans” (defined as light-skinned Nordics with tools, weapons, culture, and great leadership potential) and primitive, passive traits onto dark-skinned races. In this way they provided a “scientific” justification for imperialism, colonialism, and even slavery, while generating credibility for their ideological positions.⁵

As the end of the 19th century approached, Aryan Romanticism and the Indo-European discourse moved to the “right.” Perceived at the century’s start as the realm of progressive “humanism and liberalism,” the Indo-European discourse succumbed to “vitalism, nationalism, and mysticism” (125) by the century’s end.⁶ Its representatives were no longer modernizers; they were now neo-traditionalists who wished to revitalize national tradition as a counterbalance to modernism and materialism by using the “weapons” of modernity against modernity. They were conservative -- even reactionary -- and nationalistic. Wagnerianism embodies this new trend. In the scientific works of the academic Gustaf Kossina (1858-1931) and the ideological tracts of Wagner’s son-in-law, Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855-1927),

4 The word “Aryan” was introduced in the mid-19th century to distinguish the light-skinned, linguistically Indo-European Indians of the North (Aryans) from the dark-skinned, non-Indo-European Indians of the South. The introduction of the term “Aryan” was not casual: the “Indo-European” marker was linguistic; the “Aryan” marker is racial.

5 The political and social supervision, religious conversion, education, and employment of inferior races became the “white man’s burden,” i.e., the obligation and duty of the superior race to their inferior brothers for the latter’s own benefit. That divisive term first appeared in Rudyard Kipling’s Eurocentric 1899 poem, “The White Man’s Burden,” which describes the colonizers’ noble sense of obligation in the face of the ingratitude of the colonized.

6 Arvidsson defines “vitalism” here as life affirmation, the affirmation of a “strong, natural, earthly life” (152) associated with this world and nature (the notion is opposed to the belief in an afterlife of the soul).

issues of Germanic racial purity and vitalism entered the Indo-European discourse in a dark, new way. Kossina, Chamberlain, and their colleagues gave rise to the national-romantic movement collectively called *Das Völkische*, which revitalized paganism, nature and solar cults, Germanic folklore, and seasonal rites. The impact of its world view was felt to the very end of the Third Reich, and today it continues to echo in the cult popularity of certain lines within modern Germanic and Nordic neo-paganism.

During the period 1930 to 1945, Arvidsson observes, “Indo-European research, and the entire Indo-European discourse, became involved in ideological contexts that will forever make them suspect in many people’s eyes” (178). He describes the polemics of the period between the “mythologists” (the culture warriors) and the “ritualists” (the sociologists) of Himmler’s Ahnenerbe (Forschungsinstitut für Geistesgeschichte). The Nazi ritualists on whom Arvidsson focuses valorized the male warrior culture of the *Männerbünde*, with its Odinic idealization of battle frenzy, heroism, tragedy, and death. Under the Nazi regime, mythology and ritual met reality in the same way that anti-matter meets matter, with similar explosive results.⁷ Ironically, within a few years after 1945, many of these scholars whose research had played a critical role in the SS - Ahnenerbe and the Nazi world view, returned to German universities to become leading post-war scholars.

Since the Second World War, the Indo-European discourse has been dominated by two theories. The first is philologist Georges Dumézil’s (1898-1986) well-known and influential theory of the tripartite function.⁸ “As long as there is no new theory about Proto-Indo-European religion, and as long as scholars continue to use the category ‘Indo-European religion,’ this theory will remain,” Arvidsson concludes (307), although his reading of it is that Dumézil anachronistically attributed class structure to classless (pre-class) societies (299) and that his theory reveals more about the Indo-European discourse than about Indo-Europeans. The second dominant theory is archaeologist Marija Gimbutas’s (1921-1994) highly speculative view of Indo-Europeans as patriarchal, warlike horsemen from the southern Russian steppes who overran matrifocal, peaceful pre-Indo-European populations in Europe (as first described by Bachofen). In Arvidsson’s view, both theories are rooted in a reactionary world view:

7 Arvidsson points out, but does not develop in detail, the fact that reactionary Nazi ideology was effectively coupled with the use of modern methodologies, science, and technology. Although Arvidsson does not cite the volume, Jeffrey Herf’s *Reactionary Modernism; Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: CUP, 1984) is relevant here in explaining how mythology and science became bedfellows in Hitler’s Germany.

8 Dumézil’s trifunctional hypothesis identifies sovereignty, war, and production as the three “functions” of Proto-Indo-European social structure; additionally, he divides “sovereignty” into light and legal [kingship] and dark and magic [priesthood]; his hypothesis can be explicated in other terms as well. No concrete evidence indicates that it was a feature of early Indo-European societies. Dumézil’s hypothesis has come in for considerable criticism and has been accused of being as “mythological” as its material.

Dumézil's in hierarchical, anti-democratic French (but not Nazi) fascism, and Gimbutas's in "neo-traditionalist, vitalistic reaction against modernistic ideals" (292).

As a counterbalance to Dumézil, Gimbutas, and other 20th century scholars of the discourse, Arvidsson foregrounds the work of Bruce Lincoln, an historian of religions at the University of Chicago:

Bruce Lincoln is the scholar who has tried most tenaciously to come to terms with Indo-European mythology. Lincoln has chosen several different strategies to change the research about Indo-European mythology; among other things he has argued for the value of historicism, redefined the notion of myth from a power perspective, and developed a critical history of the discipline. By means of investigations into the history of scholarship, empirical studies, and theoretical reflections, Lincoln has tried to once and for all topple all Indo-European, Indo-German, and Aryan idols. (308)

Arvidsson deplores the exclusion of Lincoln's work from the continuing Indo-European discourse by those scholars who resent Lincoln's perceived attacks on Georges Dumézil's French Fascist sympathies in his scholarship. Lincoln's attempt to "clean up" the Indo-European discourse by rejecting uncritical comparativism and the subjective reconstruction of ancient myths not surprisingly evoked its own reaction from the European Indo-Europeanists.⁹

Arvidsson also takes up the issue of the Indo-European *Urheimat*. He demonstrates how the two-hundred year evolution of Aryan ideology is reflected in the peregrinations of the supposed original homeland. The *Urheimat* was first located in India, but later scholars relocated it to Iran; it then traveled to northern Europe, and finally it settled on the southern Russian steppes. During the *Urheimat's* wanderings, new, conflicting images of the Proto-Indo-European emerged: he was the founder of European languages and culture (India); he was a noble farmer with a high civilization and well-ordered community (Iran); he was a warlike and martial barbarian who valued honor and courage in battle above all else and embraced death (Northern Europe); he was the dynamic, horse-mounted conquerer of a passive, pre-Indo-European, Europic population (Russian steppes). Ultimately, the Proto-Indo-European was a

9 Readers interested in the "dark side" or the academic underbelly of the Indo-European discourse are referred to footnote 198 on p. 306 of Arvidsson's text. The footnote also explains why Jaan Puhvel and perhaps J.P. Mallory are only briefly and glancingly mentioned in *Aryan Idols*. Another issue is Bruce Lincoln's overtly Marxist point of view. Marxism has traditionally criticized the neo-traditionalist and reactionary aspects of the Indo-European discourse and has been criticized by it in turn. See also: Bruce Lincoln, "Dumézil, Ideology, and the Indo-Europeans," in *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 98 (1999): 221-227, in which Lincoln traces Dumézil's connections with the extreme right. Revered as an important scholar, Dumézil remains an ideologically ambiguous figure.

mirror for European dreams and neuroses: little textual or archaeological evidence exists for any of these particular interpretations of the Proto-Indo-European or the location of his *Urheimat*.

The Indo-European discourse did, however, play an important role in shaping modern European identity. It modeled a dualistic and complementary view of the Aryan and the “other,” privileging the Aryans: Aryans were imaginative, while the “others” were unimaginative; Aryans embraced this life, while others obsessed about a hypothetical afterlife; Aryans were brave warriors, while others were peaceful and timid; Aryans were nomadic herders, while others were settled farmers; Aryans were patriarchal, while others were matrifocal; Aryans were natural leaders, while others were natural followers, etc. Such consistent complementariness argues that motives other than the objective accumulation of linguistic, anthropological, or archaeological evidence have colored the Indo-European discourse.

The academy has lived with the Indo-European discourse for so long that many scholars assume that it is more than a hypothesis, that it must lie on a bedrock of hard scientific fact. In spite of the clear limitations of our factual knowledge of Indo-Europeans, Arvidsson points out, 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 with an independent existence (252-53). Over time, some scholars became comfortable with the idea that there had once existed an identifiable group of people who shared Indo-European language and therefore must also have shared Indo-European culture, religion, and even racial characteristics; that the “Indo-European-ness” (identity) of this group was crucial to understanding their values and belief system; that these values and beliefs differed in significant ways from middle Eastern Jewish/Semitic or Judeo-Christian paradigms and were more “appropriate” for Europeans. (Clearly some of their assumptions led to various unpleasant complications and will no doubt lead to still others in the future.) Arvidsson’s study steps back from these assumptions and reminds the reader that the Indo-European discourse is *not* a constellation of known facts and documents, but an intellectual tool constructed over modern time and across European space. It is 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.

Taking the long view, Arvidsson observes that the evolution of the Indo-European discourse coincides with the history of national, religious, ideological, class, and political prejudices held by educated, middle-class European males over the course of two centuries. The Indo-European discourse, by proposing an idealized Indo-European race of cultural heroes and conquerors, was simultaneously reacting against two things: a) the fast pace of modernity, i.e., against the growing industrialization and urbanization of Europe in the 19th century and the social, economic, political, and psychological shifts that it brought, and b) expressing fear of the nomads, savages, and barbarians who seemed to populate much of the world beyond Europe and who were brought to the attention of Europeans by explorers, missionaries, and the servants of empire. Arvidsson describes the Indo-European discourse as a modern mythological discourse that is necessarily set in the context of the enormous changes experienced by European society over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. But *whose* mythological discourse is it? Of *whose* mythology does Arvidsson speak?

Arvidsson concludes, "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). So "Indo-European research has, in many ways, been an attempt to write the origin narrative of the 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). As Enlightenment rationalism, empiricism, and modern science came to dominate the cultural products and ideologies of Europe, myth was driven into other venues: not only into such obvious havens as literature, art, and film, but also into the discourses of depth (analytical) psychology, ethnology and folklore, comparative religions, anthropology, and -- Indo-European studies.

The aristocrats and ruling elites were not concerned with issues of identity -- why should they be? They ruled by divine right and traced their bloodlines over centuries. Neither did the clergy have identity issues: regardless of class origin, the Church provided them with a defined group identity and discouraged radical individualism. Peasants also knew who they were (and who they were not) and what their earthly mission was. Frenchmen, Britons, Slavs, Scandinavians, Basques, Italians, and others had a sense of their national identities. But the emerging European bourgeoisie -- as a *class* that cut across national lines and was composed of peasants who had moved up, fringe elites who had moved down, and, in between, urban dwellers, artisans, and producers who found themselves moving with uncontrollable speed toward modernity -- developed identity problems. The identity issue was particularly felt by the men of the *educated* bourgeoisie, those who became the scholars, historians, and professors

of the new 19th century German-style university system and who controlled the Indo-European discourse.¹⁰

Two additional factors support Arvidsson's conclusion that the Indo-European discourse was a middle-class male preserve. First of all, the leading proponents of the discourse in the 19th and 20th centuries did indeed stem from the educated bourgeoisie, for the Indo-European discourse was overwhelmingly an academic issue. With two 20th century exceptions, the polemicists were male.¹¹ Second, those who passionately *rejected* the claims of Aryan superiority and other valorizing elements of the Indo-European discourse were those whose philosophies fell outside bourgeois parameters: the Austrian barbarophile Otto Höfler (1901-1987); the socialist and archaeologist Vere Gordon Childe (1892-1957); the Catholic and royalist Father Wilhelm Schmidt (1868-1954); and the feminist Marija Gimbutas.

As a scholar, Arvidsson is as much molded by his own age and its philosophies and rivalries as Friedrich Max Müller was molded by liberal Protestantism, or Ernest Renan by French anti-clericalism, or Mircea Eliade by early Nazi sympathies, or Marija Gimbutas by her antipathy for the Soviets and her feminism. "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," Arvidsson points out (292). No one entirely escapes their cultural and historical patrimony. 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 a growing critique of the Indo-European discourse, 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.¹²

After concluding Arvidsson's text, the reader must consider the degree to which the Indo-European discourse documents the rejection of the liberal Enlightenment ideal of "universal humanity" (humanism). That ideal proposed that all people, all races, are fundamentally the

10 Arvidsson distinguishes between the *educated* bourgeoisie and the *capitalist* bourgeoisie; his work addresses the mythology of the former. He also makes the point that the Indo-European discourse was a middle-class male mythology: women, children, and proletarians were excluded and forced into the "mythic" role of irrational savages, inferior classes, or "Pelagians" (319; here Arvidsson uses the term "Pelagian" broadly, to refer to the [supposedly inferior] pre-Indo-European, Eurpid population of Europe, not just of Greece).

11 The two exceptions were the pre-Nazi, *völkisch*-cultic scholar Lily Weiser-Aall (a student of Otto Höfler's) and the Lithuanian-American feminist Marija Gimbutas.

12 Another new work that also attempts to "defang" certain aspects of the Aryan myth by taking a sober, historical look at the inter-relationships among the disciplines of language, archaeology, and culture is David W. Anthony's very readable study, *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language: How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton: PUP, 2007).

same, with the same potential to evolve into primitive and/or into civilized societies (allowing for the obvious fact that geography, weather, resources, food supply, etc. make a difference to the direction and speed of the developmental path). Counter-enlightenment, particularism, and nationalism, on the other hand, divide humanity into discrete groups and assume at best that they have different abilities and potential and at worst that some groups are physically, intellectually, and/or morally superior to others according to standards that they alone define.

But the issue does not rest there. Reading Arvidsson's historiography from the vantage point of the 21st century, for example, we might speculate that the Indo-European discourse he describes has also served as a surrogate for both anti-Christian (marked) and subsequently post-Christian (unmarked) ideas in European thought. Such a philosophical/ethical position could not be openly taken in the 18th or 19th century, given the religious, social, and cultural dominance of Christianity. Even the rationalism of the Enlightenment (and its agnosticism and even atheism) were insufficient to shift the Christian ideological structures set firmly in place in Europe during the Middle Ages. The Indo-European discourse, on the other hand, provided an intellectual space in which such ideas might be examined and considered -- albeit in a "displaced," academic sort of way. The Indo-European discourse's growing obsession with pagan gods, pagan ideals, and pagan rituals was dressed in the garments of history, philology, and anthropology, but the original obsession may have represented something else. That this may have been the case in the past is supported today by the growing contemporary interest in neo-paganism, its overt and sometimes vehement rejection of Christianity, its conscious use of the term "post-Christian" to describe this rejection, and its dependence on the research and writings of the Indo-European discourse to describe and justify its own existence.

Aryan Idols tempts the reader to radical speculation and Big Picture moments (as I just demonstrated in the preceding paragraph). Arvidsson should be praised for not fearing to tackle the I-word (ideology) or to make value judgments about the ideological subtext of the Indo-European discourse. As a scholar of comparative religion and philosophy of religion, however, Arvidsson neither exceeds his academic brief nor engages in ideological wars. But a new player has recently entered the Indo-European discourse: genetic research has already begun to meddle seriously in its assumptions. Early returns indicate that the gene pool does not correspond to the linguistic dominant (in the British Isles, for example, the language may be Indo-European, but the genes are traceable to pre-Indo-European, Euripid ancestors, probably Iberian). This new research may validate the language-culture scholars and impugn the racial anthropologists among Indo-Europeanists, and perhaps the Indo-European "discourse" will be settled once and for all (although we should not hold our breath).

At the start of his historiography Arvidsson asked “whether there is something in the nature of research about Indo-Europeans that makes it especially prone to ideological abuse” (3), and 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 was transformed “from a bourgeois, largely liberal humanism to a nationalist and racist ‘primitivism,’ from Aryan romanticism to Aryan nationalism” (149). The “Indo-European discourse” is thus the incremental creation of an “Aryan myth,” a scientific, erudite myth that requires the collaboration of linguistics, mythology, comparative religions, anthropology, archaeology, cultural history, and even psychology. The lines between myth and ideology and science and ideology, it turns out, are not as clearly drawn as some would like to believe. Ideology does shape scholarship, even “scientific” scholarship. Arvidsson’s study shows how clear this is in the Indo-European case -- and his work should prod all scholars to remember the limitations imposed on interpretation and understanding by history, belief, and human desire.

Two final, brief comments: First, Arvidsson makes assumptions about his readers’ knowledge base. This is not a book for readers who are curious about what Indo-European studies are generally about. It is dense, but it rewards effort. Second, readers should be alert to occasional infelicities by the translator, 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).

Second, Arvidsson’s study provides an extremely useful context for scholars considering the most recent development in the Indo-European discourse: today’s neo-pagan movements in Northern Europe, Scandinavia, the Baltic states, and Russia, especially the new Russian Aryanism and Eurasianism, and their connections to the rise of neo-Fascism and right-wing movements in post-collapse Russia.

Maria Carlson
University of Kansas

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