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Fact, Theory, and Interpretation: The Enduring Legacy of 19th-Century Historiographical Traditions

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ABSTRACT

Examining the historiographical traditions of Positivism, Empiricism, and Rankean methodology—which predominated 19th-century historical thought—this paper critically looks how Empiricism stressed sensory experience as the basis of knowledge whereas positivism, inspired by Auguste Comte, sought universal rules controlling historical evolution. Rooted on archive study, Rankean historiography sought to recreate history "as it actually happened" free from theoretical influence. These traditions combined objective truth-seeking with subjective interpretation, therefore influencing current historical study despite their methodological distinctions. The paper investigates how these methods produced ongoing discussions on historical objectivity and technique as well as helped historical science grow. Examining their philosophical underpinnings helps this study to expose the shortcomings and achievements of every school as well as challenge the degree to which history can be really objective. In the end, it contends that the choice of data, methodological preferences, and interpretive frameworks by the historian shapes historical narratives thereby contradicting the positivist concept of objective historical reality.

INTRODUCTION

In the discipline of historiography, the nineteenth century was a transforming time when three major traditions—Positivism, Empiricism, and Rankean approach—emerged. These schools of view aimed to define history as a field of study, therefore guiding contemporary historical research. Though each school had different philosophical and methodological foundations, they together formed what E.H. Carr called the "commonsense view of history," an approach that was firmly ingrained in subjective interpretation despite claims to objectivity. Reflecting larger intellectual processes like the growth of scientific reason, the spread of archive research, and an increasing focus on empirical confirmation, the evolution of historiographical thinking throughout this time mirrored.[1]

Among these traditions, Positivism—developed by Auguste Comte—aimed to create history as a science under control by universal rules. Positivists believed that three stages—the theological, the metaphysical, and the scientific (or positive) stage—historical progress travelled a straight line. Like natural events, Comte maintained, human civilisations developed under observable, classifiable, predictable deterministic principles. Inspired by Enlightenment rationality, his method sought to clean history of speculative components by substituting methodical observation and categorisation. Positivism aimed to provide a clear framework for historical interpretation by supporting an inductive process of research wherein facts were acquired by observation and used to develop universal rules. Its strict application of scientific ideas to human history, especially in relation to its rejection of individual agency and cultural character, was criticised, nonetheless.[2]

Deeply ingrained in British intellectual heritage, empiricism offered another but equally powerful method. Rising from the writings of thinkers such as John Locke, David Hume, and John Stuart Mill, Empiricism gave sensory experience first priority as the only source of knowing. Empiricist historians argued that free from speculative theory, history should be rebuilt absolutely from observable data. Modern archive research and the critical study of historical documents owe their foundation to this focus on primary sources and first-hand narratives. Unlike Positivists, who attempted to reveal universal rules of history, Empiricists claimed that historical knowledge could only be gained from distinct, verifiable facts. Empiricism had restrictions, especially in its presumption that facts could speak for themselves, therefore ignoring the interpretive function of the historian even with its dedication to impartiality.[3]

Named after Leopold von Ranke, the Rankean movement sought to balance political history with the rigidity of Empiricism. Ranke's well-known maxim, "to show what actually happened" underlined his conviction in painstaking archival study as means of recreating the history. His strategy stressed diplomatic history, original sources, and a dispassionate technique. Critics have argued, however, that Ranke's cultural and national prejudices affected even his apparently objective historical accounts, therefore supporting the case that total historical objectivity is impossible. Though their approaches were different, these historiographical traditions together impacted the direction of historical research. While Positivism aimed to reveal deterministic patterns in history, Empiricism supported source-based factual accuracy, and Rankean historiography emphasised rigorous archive study. Still, every method had intrinsic conflicts that begged basic issues about the nature of historical reality. This research investigates how these traditions, despite their claims to impartiality, were unavoidably impacted by the historian’s choices, interpretive frameworks, and ideological influences.

The study employs a qualitative historiographical analysis to examine the impact of Positivism, Empiricism, and Rankean methodology on historical writing. Primary and secondary sources, including philosophical treatises, historical texts, and scholarly critiques, are analysed to trace the evolution of these traditions. A comparative approach is used to highlight their methodological distinctions and intersections, assessing their influence on modern historiography. Emphasis is placed on textual analysis, archival research, and the historiographical debates surrounding objectivity and interpretation. By critically evaluating these frameworks, the study aims to understand their contributions, limitations, and enduring relevance in historical inquiry.

The nineteenth century saw the emergence of three major historiographical traditions—Positivism, Empiricism, and Rankean methodology—that collectively shaped what E.H. Carr termed the "commonsense

view of history." Despite their significant philosophical contradictions, these traditions were often blended in historical practice. Positivism, influenced by Auguste Comte, sought to establish universal laws and a teleological approach to historical progression. In contrast, Empiricism, deeply rooted in British intellectual thought, rejected overarching theoretical structures and emphasized sensory experience as the basis for knowledge. Meanwhile, Rankean historiography, grounded in meticulous archival research and an emphasis on political history, sought to reconstruct the past "as it actually happened" without overt theoretical speculation. These schools, despite their methodological disparities, were often used interchangeably by both proponents and critics, leading to a historiographical landscape that both sought objective truth and yet remained inherently shaped by subjective selection and interpretation of evidence. Their combined impact laid the foundation for modern historical inquiry while also generating enduring debates on the nature of historical truth.

Auguste Comte and the Positivist Philosophy

French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857) established the Positivist philosophy. He adhered to the universalism-promoting Enlightenment tradition. The philosophers of the Enlightenment held that what applied to one civilisation also applied to all others. As a result, they believed that universal rules that applied to everyone on the planet might be created. Comte disagreed with the Romanticists' emphasis on individuality and supported this universal concept. From 1814 to 1824, Comte studied under the utopian socialist Henri Saint-Simon (1760–1825). In addition to Saint-Simon, he was influenced by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), David Hume (1711-1776), and John Locke (1632-1704). His own philosophical framework was shaped by all of these factors. His two primary publications were named The Course of Positive Politics and The Course of Positive Philosophy.[4]

He developed his theoretical model of history in the first book, which was published in six volumes between 1830 and 1842. Comte believed that all ideas and knowledge progressed through three phases in succession. "The theological or fictitious; the metaphysical or abstract; and the scientific or positive" are the chronological order of these phases. The first of these three phases is the most important one that the human mind must inevitably go through. The ultimate and "fixed and definite state" of human knowledge is the third stage, whereas the second is a transitional one. Comte also draws a comparison between the historical development of ideas and the maturation of a person from infancy to maturity. He said that the third stage—the Positive stage—was emerging, whereas the previous two phases were now passed. Comte believed that industry and science dominated the Positive period. Theologians and priests have been replaced by scientists in this era, while industrialists such as dealers, managers, and bankers have taken the position of soldiers. Comte thought that science should come first.[5]

The quest for the rules governing different occurrences is ongoing throughout the Positive stage. According to Comte, "the means of this knowledge are reasoning and observation." All individual occurrences and phenomena must ultimately be connected to a few universal rules. According to Comte, if the positivist theory could "represent all phenomena as particular aspects of a single general fact; such as gravitation, for instance," then it would be complete. Thus, positivism maintained that knowledge could be produced by observation. The Empiricist tradition, which highlighted the importance of sensory experience, was quite similar to positivism in this regard. Experience and observation were thus seen as the most crucial and significant functions. The result of this operation was facts. But at its most basic level, the Positivist theory did not care about specific facts. Rather, they adhered to universal rules.[6]

The induction technique, which entails establishing facts via observation and experience before deriving rules based on their commonality, was to be used to deduce these laws. Therefore, general rules are only a collection of facts drawn from sensory experience in the eyes of positivists. As a result, truths are established by sensory experience and then verified by experiments, which eventually results in the development of general laws. The fundamental principles of human growth would be connected to these universal laws, much as those found in the sciences. These principles might be used to forecast and alter societal development patterns once they are found (and developed). Individual facts—or people, for that matter—were irrelevant in such a plan. As a result, Comte denigrated historians as just gathering data that, once general rules were established, were irrelevant to him. The three main tenets of Comte's philosophical approach were: 1) He believed that the industrial society that Western Europe had built will serve as the

template for society worldwide in the future. 2) He thought that the positivist philosophy, which he named scientific thinking, applied to both the sciences and society. He believed that this way of thinking—and implicitly, positivism—would eventually permeate every society on the planet. 3) Comte thought that people were the same everywhere. Therefore, the universal rules of development that he had found could be applied to all civilisations. In Comte's day, several of these concepts were widespread. Many people believed that the era of religion was finished and that the age of industry and science had come. Comte's core concepts came from two sources: Condorcet's theory of inevitable progression through certain phases and the determinism principle found in the writings of French political philosopher Montesquieu (1689–1755).[7]

In Raymond Aron's words, Comte's main argument may thus be expressed as follows: "Strict determinism governs social phenomena and manifests itself in the inevitable evolution of human societies, which is in turn controlled by the development of the human mind." Equipped with this idea, Comte looked for a fundamental pattern in the human world that would account for everything. According to him, "the rational co-ordination of the fundamental sequence of the various events of human history according to a single design" would be "a final result of all our historical analysis." According to Comte, the positivist approach would include observing facts and data, verifying them via experimentation, and ultimately establishing universal laws. This approach was intended to be used in both the humanities, including history and sociology, and the sciences. Additionally, the person had little influence over the developing process, much as in the sciences. Therefore, Comte's approach may have the following effects on historians: 1) Similar to other disciplines, history is governed by general principles that may help to understand how humans evolve. 2) Every society and civilisation will inevitably go through certain phases as the human mind develops. 3) History cannot be altered by individuals. 4) The inductive approach, which Comte thought was appropriate for the sciences and included fact-finding, experimentation, and the development of universal principles, ought to be used when writing history as well.[8]

Empiricist Tradition

The Greek word "empeiria," which means "experience," is where the name "empiricism" originates. According to philosophy, experience is the foundation of all knowledge, and experience alone serves as the basis for all knowledge in the world. Knowledge obtained via tradition, conjecture, theoretical reasoning, or imagination is not the right kind of knowledge, according to empiricists. As a result, the corpora of knowledge drawn from religious doctrines, philosophical conjectures, moral teachings, and works of literature and art cannot be verified and are hence untrustworthy. According to empiricists, the only valid knowledge is that which can be independently confirmed to be true. Both positivists and empiricists contend that the sole source of true knowledge is the perceptible, visible world. They include texts as tangible items that may contribute to knowledge. The metaphysical, unobservable, and unverifiable ways of knowing are rejected by them. The history of empiricism is lengthy.[9]

The Greek sophists were the first Empiricists in the western philosophical tradition, concentrating their investigations on actual objects. Unlike many other Greek philosophers, they did not depend on conjecture. Although he may also be credited by other groups that reject Empiricism, Aristotle is sometimes regarded as the founder of the Empiricist tradition. Thomas Aquinas believed that the senses were the primary source of knowledge in mediaeval Europe. "Everything in the intellect is first in the senses," he said. There has been a very strong Empiricist tradition in Britain. Francis Bacon believed in the 16th century that the only way to get a true picture of the world was to gather facts from observations.[10]

He made an effort to anchor philosophical investigations in science. John Locke was the most prominent Empiricist philosopher of the 17th century. John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), David Hume (1711–1776), and George Berkeley (1685–1753) were the other significant Empiricist thinkers in Britain. According to empiricism ideas, our senses—nose, hearing, and eyes, among others—serve as mirrors for the objects and happenings in the outside world. We make connections between objects and events and build an understanding of the world based on those perceptions. The way we express the world in words matches the reality in all its details.[11]

As a result, the word "potato" precisely refers to a certain natural material object. The following concepts may be attributed to empiricism: 1) Concrete objects and events, together with their attributes and

connections, comprise the actual world as we see it. 2) Individual experiences may be separated from one another, from their object, and from the subject's location.[12] As a result, an experience may be explained without mentioning the individual who had it or the situation that led to it. It implies that the facts may be isolated from the people, organisations, or society that created them as well as from the historians who are said to have discovered them.[13] 3) When someone encounters a certain thing, they need to be a blank slate, impacted just by the experience. His or her ideological inclination and prior experiences are irrelevant. When it comes to writing history, it implies that the historian or fact-finder should only be swayed by the facts they have gathered, not by preexisting ideologies or ideas. 4) Inductive generalisation is the only way to determine the nature of the universe. However, all of these generalisations need to be confirmed by trials and may be replaced or adjusted by more or distinct experiences. 5) Experiences and experiences alone are the source of all knowledge. As a result, all metaphysical conjectures or professed knowledge of the transcendental realm are grounded on nothing. According to the Empiricists, historians should place their faith on the historical evidence that our contemporaries have provided us via their sensory experiences. If historians examine these sources carefully, they can paint an accurate picture of the past.

CONCLUSION

The historiographical traditions of Positivism, Empiricism, and Rankean technique have greatly affected historical investigation, each presenting various viewpoints on objectivity, evidence, and interpretation. Empiricism stressed direct sensory experience, Positivism sought universal rules guiding history, and Rankean technique supported careful archive investigation. Despite their methodological conflicts, these ideas were widely merged in historical practice, shaping contemporary historiography. Later historians who advocate a more interpretative and critical approach have disputed their strict dedication to perfect neutrality, nevertheless. The development of historical theory shows that history is a continuous conversation influenced by viewpoint and context rather than just a record of facts. Knowing these customs helps historians to value their contributions and acknowledge the limits of deterministic or essentially empirical approaches. History remains a dynamic science, where methodological pluralism promotes a more nuanced and thorough knowledge of the past, combining scientific rigour with interpretive depth.

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