



History as It Really Was? Revisiting Rankean Historiography and Its Critiques

M.C. Raja

¹ Professor & Head, Department of History, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, Tamil Nadu, India.

*** Corresponding Author:**

M.C. Raja

dr Raja25@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received	19 Oct, 2024
Revised	28 Nov, 2024
Accepted	30 Dec, 2024
Available Online	30 Dec, 2024

ARTICLE ID

HRJHA0204004

KEYWORDS

Rankean historiography, historical objectivity, positivism, empirical history, historical interpretation. .



ABSTRACT

The study examines the Rankean tradition of historiography, which sought to establish history as an objective and empirical discipline based on archival research and factual accuracy. Rooted in the Positivist philosophy of Auguste Comte, Ranke's methodology emphasized primary sources and historical neutrality. However, critics like Burckhardt, Dilthey, and Croce challenged the feasibility of total objectivity, arguing that historical narratives are shaped by interpretation. The early 20th century saw further critiques, with scholars asserting that historical facts do not exist independently of the historian's perspective. While Ranke's emphasis on empirical rigor shaped modern historiography, the balance between fact and interpretation remains a central debate. This study explores the strengths and limitations of Rankean historiography and its impact on contemporary historical thought. While Rankean methods remain foundational, historiography has evolved to acknowledge the historian's role in shaping historical narratives.

INTRODUCTION

Originally reacting to prior speculative and moralistic methods of history, the Rankean school of historiography developed in the 19th century. Leopold von Ranke promoted thorough empirical investigation, reliance on original sources, and an objective reconstruction of previous events, hence transforming historical methodology. Emphasising factual truth and objectivity, his well-known maxim, "to show how it really was," laid the groundwork for professional historical study. Positivist philosophy, especially that of Auguste Comte, strengthened this empirical method by encouraging the concept that systematic observation and categorisation may help one to determine historical truth.¹ Though transforming, Ranke's approach has some limits. Critics such as Jacob Burckhardt, Wilhelm Dilthey, and



Benedetto Croce contended that because historians always see materials from their own vantage point, total objectivity in history is impossible. Early in the 20th century, ideas such as R.G. Collingwood's and Carl Becker's stressing on the need of historical interpretation underwent a paradigm change. The merits and shortcomings of the Rankean tradition are investigated in this paper along with their influence on historiographical discussions.² While contemporary historiography challenges the idea of a totally objective history by acknowledging the interaction between fact and interpretation, Ranke's empirical rigour remains essential to historical inquiry.

Objectives

The present study aims to analyse the Rankean tradition, evaluate its contributions to historiography, and examine its limitations. It explores the evolution of historical objectivity, critiques by later historians, and the ongoing debate between empirical accuracy and interpretative analysis in historical writing.

Methodology

It employs a qualitative historical analysis, examining primary texts by Ranke and secondary critiques by later scholars. Comparative analysis is used to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the Rankean approach. The study also incorporates historiographical debates to understand how Ranke's legacy continues to shape historical methodology today.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Modern historical research originated in Leopold von Ranke's rigorous, evidence-based methodology, which changed the study of history into a disciplined field. His focus on empirical approach, critical source analysis, and historical objectivity created a paradigm that dominated historical research all through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Though Ranke's methodology clearly broke from scholarly and didactic approaches to history, it was not without limits.³ Though innovative, his emphasis on factual accuracy and archive sources also resulted in a limited knowledge of historical events that mostly disregarded more general social and economic forces. This begs basic issues like whether history can ever be really impartial and if depending only on original sources restricts the capacity of historians to create significant interpretations of the past.

Before Ranke's involvement, Enlightenment writers such Edward Gibbon, Voltaire, and David Hume—who aimed to establish universal laws of human behaviour rather than perform thorough empirical study—dominated historical literature. These historians tended to force moral precepts onto historical events and gave great stories first priority above critical source study. Several limitations hampered their approach: limited access to archive records, censorship enforced by state and religious authority, and formal academic training in historical techniques absent.⁴ These obstacles were mostly destroyed by the French Revolution and the later political changes in Europe, which gave historians broader access to official archives and encouraged a more critical interaction with historical materials. This philosophical change set the stage for Ranke's methodological revolution—which depended on a painstaking review of primary sources as the basis of historical knowledge. Ranke broke with earlier methods with his historiographical philosophy, which he presented in his 1824 book *The History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations*. Empirical historiography's guiding concept became his statement that history served only to "show how it really was" rather than assess the past or guide the present.⁵

This comment underlined his conviction that history should be seen on its own terms rather than via the prism of modern ideals. Ranke's concentration on historicity meant that rather than forcing present-day concerns onto historical narratives, historians should aim to recreate past events based on the viewpoints and objectives of the people who lived through them. This concept strengthened the belief that every historical era has distinct personality that should be examined separately instead of being seen as part of a predefined road of development.⁶

Central to Ranke's technique was the conviction that knowledge of the past could only be acquired via direct contact with documented evidence. He supported the only reasonable basis for

historical research being original sources—letters, official documents, and personal narratives. Ranke maintained that historians must meticulously examine archive sources and create their stories purely from the available facts, unlike older historians who often depended on secondary stories or philosophical conjecture. However, he was not naïve about the authenticity of sources and realised that not all records bore equal historical importance.⁷ He thus created a hierarchy of sources, stressing the requirement of exact dating and contextual interpretation and putting modern records above retroactive narratives. This method improved historical research and instituted source openness and citation policies, therefore enabling other academics to examine and validate historical assertions. Ranke is committed to factual truth, although one of the most divisive elements of his approach is still his difference between facts and interpretation. Critics have pointed out that the act of choosing, compiling, and presenting historical material is itself an interpretive activity, even as he maintained that historians first must establish facts before engaging in interpretation.⁸

No historian approaches materials without a framework of knowledge; the idea of "objective" history is challenged by the inherent subjectivity involved in deciding which facts are important. Furthermore removed from historical study were more general social, economic, and cultural aspects by Ranke's emphasis on political and diplomatic history—mostly focused on states, rulers, and armed confrontations. His approach reinforced a narrative that prioritised elite players above structural causes, therefore completely ignoring the perspectives of underprivileged people like peasants, workers, and women.

Still, Ranke's effect went well beyond his own works. His founding of graduate seminars at the University of Berlin in 1833 institutionalised historical education, hence generating a new generation of academics dedicated to empirical investigation. Rankean historiography was further established in Germany by the production of historical periodicals such *Historische Zeitschrift* (1859), *Revue Historique* (1876), *English Historical Review* (1886), and *American Historical Review* (1895). Most European and American colleges had embraced his analytical approach by the late nineteenth century, and his ideas affected historical study in other fields.⁹

But the growth of social history, economic history, and cultural studies in the twentieth century revealed the limits of rigorous empiricism. Critics said that Ranke's rejection of theoretical models hampered historians from seeing more fundamental trends of historical development.¹⁰ Unlike Comtean positivism, which aimed to create universal rules of history, Rankean historiography concentrated on the distinctiveness of events without trying to generate further generalisations. This generated a natural conflict in historical studies: while the exact reconstruction of the past remained crucial, historians saw more and more the necessity of theoretical viewpoints to make sense of difficult historical events.¹¹ Ranke's legacy is still debated as well as fundamental. His stress on careful source analysis and factual accuracy turned history into a professional academic field, defining methodological criteria that continue to support historical study. But his avoidance of general theoretical concerns and his exclusion of social and economic systems from historical study have drawn major criticism. The move towards multidisciplinary methods in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries shows that while Rankean empiricism is still a fundamental basis for historical technique, it is insufficient on its own. Modern historians must strike a balance between interpretive analysis and empirical rigours so that history stays both analytically relevant and evidence-based.¹²

Empiricist View of History

Though they differed, what all these customs had in common proved essential for the evolution of historiography. First of all, they all agreed that history—along with sociology, politics, and economics—was a science and that comparable approaches of inquiry and analysis could be used in all spheres. Second, history addressed truth and facts outside and apart from the historians' perspective.¹³ Thirdly, history flowed in more or less linear succession in which events followed the prior ones in linear chronological time. Among the hard-core Positivist historians were Henry Thomas Buckle in England and Numa-Denis Fustel de Coulanges in France. Coulanges said that what could not be seen did not exist. In his work *Les Origines de la France Contemporaine* (1874–93), Hyppolyte Taine sought to present history as "geometry of forces." In his *History of Civilisation in England* (1857–61), Buckle sought to explain English history in terms of such elements as climate, geography and natural



psychology. Such historians have made fairly little contribution to the accepted historical legacy. Histiography has developed thanks in great part on the Rankean and Empiricist traditions.¹⁴

Theodor Mommsen (1817-1903), the eminent German historian was a disciple of Ranke. He became renowned for his classic Roman History published in 3 volumes. This book was a shining illustration of his painstaking research. He wrote about the history of Roman republic from its creation until its demise by employing numismatic, philological and epigraphic sources. He compiled the Corpus of Latin Inscriptions and produced additional works like Provinces of the Roman Empire from Caesar to Diocletian. Another key person in this tradition was Lord Acton (1834–1902).¹⁵

Editing the first Cambridge Modern History edition was his most enduring gift. Acton thought it feasible to create "ultimate history" in not too distant future when all the evidence will be available. He told the contributors to volume to "meet the demand for completeness and certainty". "Contributors will understand that our Waterloo must be one that satisfies French and English, German and Dutch alike; that nobody can tell, without examining the list of authors, where the Bishop of Oxford laid down the pen and whether Fairburn or Gasquet, Libermann or Harrison took up," he wrote to them. Another outstanding English historian in this tradition was J.B. Bury (1861–1927).¹⁶ He also urged the historians to be truthful, correct in their presentation of facts and to fully believe in the scientific character of history. He claimed that while history was a science, it was not like either philosophy or literature even if it may provide ideas for work. Among the many significant historical books he produced are A History of the Later Roman Empire and Greece. Published in 1898, C.V. Langlois and Charles Seignobos's extremely powerful textbook Introduction to the Study of History summed up this perspective of history. The writers said that the goal of history writing was "not to please, nor to give practical maxims of behaviour, nor to arouse emotions, but knowledge pure and simple". Though many people disagreed with this perspective, this legacy ruled in the 19th and much of the professional history followed in the 20th century. much historians accept in its core premises that facts have a distinct and independent existence and that much of our knowledge of the physical world ultimately stems from sense experiences.

Critiques

The positivist and empiricist perspectives on history have been widely criticised. Historians have critiqued this approach of writing history since the Rankean period. "The objectivity of a eunuch" is how Johan Gustav Droysen (1808–1884), who taught history in Berlin from 1859 to 1884, characterised Ranke's impartial attitude. Jacob Burckhardt (1818–97), who taught history in Basle starting in 1845, offered an alternate perspective to Ranke's. Although he was a student of Ranke, he rejected his style of writing history and adopted that of Jules Michelet (1798-1874) and Augustin Thierry (1795-1856). The simple empiricism was attacked by Thierry and Michelet, who also produced concepts linked to the "historical romanticism" school. This historical movement emphasised the ideas that the Positivist and Rankean schools had disregarded.¹⁷

The significance of historians' involvement in history writing was underlined by the historians who were part of this movement. Instead of being aloof, they thought the historian had to be passionate and dedicated. In contrast to the logical method, they also highlighted the moral aspect of writing history. More weight was placed on the local and the specific than on the universal and the general. In contrast to the strategy that gave the leaders more importance, the history of the community as a whole was highlighted. According to Thierry, his goal in writing history was to "present the adventures of social life and not those of the individual, to imagine the destiny of peoples and not of certain famous men." This school emphasised that history was as much art as science and valued literary abilities in the writing of history. They attacked empiricism for emphasising unbiased interpretation and cultivating a cult of sources. Instead, they emphasised the importance of emotions and sentiments in creating history.¹⁸

The First World War and its aftermath rocked the belief that historical accounts could be produced that would satisfy people of all nationalities, despite the fact that many historians had already seriously questioned the possibility of a scientific, neutral, and value-free history prior to 1914. In fact, several nations' historians authored histories that ran counter to those of other nations. Their

interpretations of the events validated their respective countries. The general trend was to produce nationalist histories rather than "scientific" ones, notwithstanding the outliers to this pattern. The nationalist histories were really presented as scientific ones. There was significant pressure on the Rankean and Positivist goals of creating "scientific" and "objective" history. The natural sciences' methodologies and "truths" were accepted by positivists. They also aimed to use similar techniques in the study of society. As a result, they called these fields social sciences. They thought that, as in the scientific sciences, predictions regarding the future of society might be made by the application of inductive procedures. However, the character of the natural sciences also underwent a theoretical transformation in the 20th century. Proposed in 1913, Albert Einstein's General Theory of Relativity fundamentally altered the character of natural science study. These advancements had an impact on historical understanding as well. Rankean objectivity and positivist certainty suddenly seemed to be a thing of the past. Now, a lot of scholars stressed how history is relativistic.¹⁹

Among the most significant theorists in this area were R.G. Collingwood (1889–1943) in England, Benedetto Croce (1866–1952) in Italy, and Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) in Germany. According to Croce's assertion that "all history is contemporary history," history is always written with the issues of the day in mind and is influenced by the ideological resources that historians have at their disposal. By stating that "the facts of history do not exist for any historian till he creates them," the American historian Carl Becker rejected the idea that facts existed at all. Collingwood's bold assertion that "all history is the history of thought" went much beyond. The typical division between truth and interpretation, which the majority of historians before to World War I were inclined to make, was what these theorists were contesting. Historians generally agreed with their opinions. Just as the importance of sources had gained significant significance early on, so too had the position of the historian. It was always believed that the historian had the right to do the interpretive task.²⁰

However, it was now believed that the historian had the right to decide what should be regarded as fact. According to E.H. Carr, "the necessity to establish these basic facts rests on a priori decision of the historian, not on any quality of the facts themselves." The data must now be forced to speak in the historian's language; unlike the empiricists, they no longer speak for themselves. "The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: he is the one who decides to give the floor to which facts, and in what order or context.... a fact is like a sack — it won't stand up until you've put something in it," to paraphrase E.H. Carr. These opinions are presented by E.H. Carr as the Collingwood perspective on history. He himself takes a more circumspect stance, giving historians and facts equal weight. This is the general approach used by the majority of practicing historians.

CONCLUSION

Three connected philosophical currents—the Positivist philosophy of Auguste Comte, the Rankean focus on archival sources and factual accuracy, and the Empiricist tradition most prevalent in Britain—have been investigated in this paper under the Positivist tradition of historiography. Together, these schools of thought aimed to establish history as an objective, scientific discipline based on verified sources free from human interpretation, anchored on Positivist historians maintained the view that facts existed apart from the historian and that total impartiality in historical writing was both feasible and preferred. Still, this method drew criticism even in the 19th century from people like Jacob Burckhardt and Wilhelm Dilthey, who questioned the degree of historical impartiality. Early in the 20th century, a more major difficulty arose when intellectuals such as Benedetto Croce, Carl Becker, and R.G. Collingwood argued that historical events cannot be totally divorced from perspective. Emphasising the historian's influence on historical narratives, these criticisms changed historiographical perspective. Extreme relativism proved as difficult, but a more reasonable viewpoint surfaced—one that acknowledges the interaction between facts and interpretation in historical writing.

REFERENCES

1. Jacques Bos, "Renaissance Historiography: Framing a New Mode of Historical Experience," *The Making of the Humanities, Vol. 1: Early Modern Europe*, edited by Rens Bod, Jaap Maat, and Thijs Weststeijn, Amsterdam University Press, 2010, pp. 351-365.



2. F.R. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, Stanford University Press, 2005, pp. 326-328, 356-363.
3. Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-first Century*, Verso, 2007.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. Wolfgang Hardtwig, "Geschichtsreligion – Wissenschaft als Arbeit – Objektivität: der Historismus in neuer Sicht," *Historische Zeitschrift*, vol. 252, 1991, pp. 1-32.
7. Daniel Fulda, "Historicism as a Cultural Pattern: Practising a Mode of Thought," *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, vol. 4, 2010, pp. 138-153.
8. John Edward Toews, *Becoming Historical: Cultural Reformation and Public Memory in Early Nineteenth-Century Berlin*, Cambridge University Press, 2004.
9. Friedrich Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, R. Oldenbourg, 1936.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Bos, *op. cit.*, pp. 355-360.
12. Ankersmit, *op. cit.*, pp. 330-335.
13. Arrighi, *op. cit.*, pp. 105-120.
14. Hardtwig, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-18.
15. Fulda, *op. cit.*, pp. 140-145.
16. Toews, *op. cit.*, pp. 210-220.
17. Meinecke, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-110.
18. *ibid.*, p. 360.
19. *ibid.*, p. 335.
20. *ibid.*, p. 18.