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Historicism: The History and Meaning of the Term

Georg G. Iggers

In the last few years a considerable number of books and articles have appeared in Germany, the United States, and Italy on the topic of historicism. There is, however, no consensus in this literature on the meaning of the term.¹ Thus three very different discussions have been carried on simultaneously, pursuing different themes and only occasionally intersecting. A number of writings have dealt with the so-called "crisis of historicism" in the context of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Here historicism has come to be identified with relativism and loss of faith in the values of modern Western culture. This relativism has been considered a permanent aspect of intellectual life under the conditions of the modern world. A very different literature has identified historicism more narrowly with the historiographical outlook and practices of nineteenth- and to an extent twentieth-century scholarship in the human sciences. Finally the term "New Historicism" has been used recently in a still different context by literary and cultural critics in America. In this essay I shall restrict myself to an examination of the literature on the first two uses of the term.

I should like to dedicate this article to Ernst Schulin in honor of his sixty-fifth birthday.

¹ On the history of the term, see Dwight E. Lee and Robert N. Beck, "The Meaning of 'Historicism,'" *American Historical Review*, 59 (1953-54), 568-77; Ernst Rothacker, "Das Wort 'Historismus,'" *Zeitschrift für deutsche Wortforschung*, 16 (1960), 3-6; Carlo Antoni, *Dallo storicismo alla sociologia* (Florence, 1940) and *Lo storicismo* (Torino, 1968²); B. A. Grushin, "Historicism" in *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, a translation of the third edition (New York, 1970), X, 88-89; Donald R. Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship: Language, Law, and History in the French Renaissance* (New York, 1970), 1-15; Maurice Mandelbaum, *History, Man, & Reason: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Thought* (Baltimore, 1971), particularly 41-140; Georg G. Iggers, "Historicism" in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (New York, 1973), II, 456-64; Otto Gerhard Oexle, "'Historismus.' Überlegungen zur Geschichte des Phänomens und des Begriffs," *Jahrbuch*, Braunschweigische wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft (1986), 119-55.

The History of the Term

The first use of the term *Historismus* that I have been able to discover occurs in a set of fragmentary notes on philology which Friedrich Schlegel jotted down in 1797. Here the term already possesses something of its later meaning. For Schlegel “Winckelmann’s [sic] *Historismus*” had introduced a “new epoch” in philosophy in recognizing the “immeasurable distinctness” (*den unermesslichen Unterschied*) and “the totally unique nature of Antiquity.” In contrast to Winckelmann the “popular philosophers” of the eighteenth century had distorted the character of antiquity by superimposing philosophic notions on it. Schlegel warns against a “theoretical, but un-historical opinion [*Ansicht*] ... [w]ithout any references to specific persons [*Ohne alle persönliche Indikationen*].”² In the following year Novalis used the term *Historism* in the course of a very miscellaneous listing of methods (Fichte’s, Kant’s, chemical, mathematical, artistic, etc.), without, however, assigning it a clear meaning.³

The term *Historismus* was used occasionally in Germany in the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century, e.g., by Ludwig Feuerbach,⁴ Christoph J. Braniss,⁵ I. H. Fichte⁶ (the son of J. G. Fichte), and Carl Prantl,⁷ with a meaning not that different from the one which Schlegel had used. *Historismus* signified a historical orientation which recognized individuality in its “concrete temporal-spatiality” (Prantl), as pursued for example by the Historical School of Law (Savigny and Eichhorn), distinct from a fact-oriented empiricism as well as from the system-building philosophy of history in the Hegelian manner (Haym)⁸ which ignores factuality. Karl Werner, in his 1879 book on Giambattista Vico,⁹ saw the core of the historicist outlook in Vico’s notion that the human mind knows no other reality than history: history is made by human beings and therefore reflects human intentions, that is, meaning. Nature, because it is not made by humans, reflects no meanings which can be understood in this way. Historicism is thus closely bound up with a certain form of epistemological idealism

² Friedrich Schlegel, “Zur Philologie I,” in *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* (Paderborn, 1981), XVI, 35-41.

³ Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg (Novalis, pseud.), *Schriften*, ed. Paul Kluckhohn (Jena, 1923), III, 173.

⁴ Feuerbach, review of “Kritik des Idealismus von F. Dorguth” (1838) in *Sämtliche Werke* (Leipzig, 1846-66), II, 143-44.

⁵ Braniss, *Die wissenschaftliche Aufgabe der Gegenwart* (Breslau, 1848), 113-38, 195, 200, 248.

⁶ Fichte, *Die philosophischen Lehren von Recht, Staat und Sitte in Deutschland, Frankreich und England von der Mitte des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts bis zur Gegenwart* (Leipzig, 1850), 469-70.

⁷ Prantl, *Die gegenwärtige Aufgabe der Philosophie* (Munich, 1852).

⁸ Rudolf Haym, *Hegel und seine Zeit* (Berlin, 1857).

⁹ Karl Werner, *Giambattista Vico als Philosoph und gelehrter Forscher* (Vienna, 1879).

which foreshadows the later positions of Benedetto Croce¹⁰ and R. G. Collingwood¹¹ that history always deals with thought, that is with meanings, which must be understood.

From these assumptions there derived a theory of historical knowledge which was formulated by historically oriented thinkers in the nineteenth century who did not actually use the term. The German Historical School, as it developed at the universities of the nineteenth century, was founded on these assumptions.¹² Leopold Ranke very early distinguished between what he called a historical from a philosophical approach. His argument was that while philosophy sought to reduce reality to a system which sacrificed the unique qualities of the historical world, history chose to acquire an understanding of the general through immersion in the particular.¹³ Yet there was a kinship between the world as Hegel saw it and as Ranke saw it. Both assumed a coherence hidden behind the phenomenal world. While Ranke stressed the necessity of proceeding from a critical reconstruction of the events which constitute history, he was also convinced that out of this reconstruction of the past, "wie es eigentlich gewesen," the great forces which shaped history would become apparent.¹⁴ For him every individual as well as each of the great supra-individual institutions, whether states, nations, churches, or cultures, constituted a concrete meaningful whole which fit into the broader economy of the divine will.¹⁵ The purpose of historical study was therefore not exhausted by the narrative reconstruction of a factual past but consisted in grasping the overarching coherence into which this past fit.¹⁶

These random ideas in Ranke's essays and lectures were given more stringent expression in the various versions of Droysen's *Historik* after 1857 and in his critical review of 1861 of the first volume of Henry Thomas Buckle's *History of England*. Assuming the link between individuals as meaningful wholes which constituted the historical world and history in a broader sense, Droysen sought to formulate principles for a science of

¹⁰ Benedetto Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty* (London, 1941) and *History, Its Theory and Practice* (New York, 1921).

¹¹ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1994).

¹² See Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middletown, 1983²).

¹³ See "On the Relations of History and Philosophy (A Manuscript of the 1830s)," in Georg G. Iggers and Konrad Von Moltke (eds.), *The Theory and Practice of History* (Indianapolis, 1973), 29-32, and "On the Character of Historical Science (A Manuscript of the 1830s)," *ibid.*, 33-46.

¹⁴ See Ranke's preface to his *Histories of the Latin and Germanic Nations*, *ibid.*, 135-38.

¹⁵ See his "The Great Powers," *ibid.*, 65-101 and "A Dialogue on Politics," *ibid.*, 102-30. On the role of the divine, see Wolfgang Hardtwig, "Geschichtsreligion—Wissenschaft als Arbeit—Objektivität," *Historische Zeitschrift*, 252 (1991), 1-32. On the "finger of God" (Gottes Finger), see *Sämtliche Werke*, LIII-LIV, 665-66.

¹⁶ See e.g., "The Great Powers," *ibid.*, 100.

history, the scientific character of which consisted in going beyond the evidence established by the critical examination of historical sources to an understanding of the coherence of history. The latter, however, was to be arrived at not through the deductive or inductive logic of the natural sciences but through what Droysen called “interpretation.”¹⁷ This assumed that the historian studied entities which were capable of being understood because they embodied sets of meaning. Thus for Droysen as for Wilhelm von Humboldt, Savigny, or Ranke, history was a hermeneutical science.¹⁸ Nevertheless it was a science.

Wilhelm Dilthey and after him the Neo-Kantian philosophers of the Freiburg school, Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert, set for themselves the task of establishing history and human or cultural sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften* or *Kulturwissenschaften*) as sciences as rigorous in their approach as the natural sciences but with a logic of inquiry which recognized that they required methods capable of interpreting the meaning embodied in history and culture.¹⁹ The sharp distinction which Dilthey and the Neo-Kantians made between the human and the natural sciences rather than between history and philosophy reflected the change which the natural sciences had undergone since the first half of the nineteenth century, when they still worked metaphorically and historically with biological and organic analogies.²⁰

If historicism so understood possessed an essentially positive meaning, as an outlook peculiarly suited for the study of the social and cultural world, it lost this once the basic assumption of the fundamental coherence of history was questioned. This occurred very early in economics when a number of economic theorists, Eugen Dühring (1866), Carl Menger (1884), and Adolf Wagner (1892),²¹ attacked the historical approach to economics taken by the Historical School of Economics (Wilhelm Roscher, Karl Knies, and Gustav Schmoller). They now used the term in a negative sense to criticize the abandonment of theory in economics and the confusion of economic theory with economic history.

A more fundamental challenge to optimistic historicist thought occurred among thinkers who accepted the basic epistemological premises of historicism—and increasingly used the term—but gave up the belief in the coher-

¹⁷ Johann Gustav Droysen, *Historik. Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Peter Leyh (Stuttgart, 1977), I, 221.

¹⁸ Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, tr. G. Barden and J. Cumming (New York, 1989), and Joachim Wach, *Das Verstehen* (3 vols; Hildesheim, 1966).

¹⁹ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften, Gesammelte Schriften* (Leipzig, 1924), VII, Wilhelm Windelband, “Geschichte und Naturwissenschaft (1894),” in *Präludien* (Tübingen, 1921), II; and Heinrich Rickert, *Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft* (Tübingen, 1921).

²⁰ Peter Reill in Georg G. Iggers and James Powell (eds.), *Leopold von Ranke and the Shaping of the Historical Discipline* (Syracuse, 1990), 21-35.

²¹ See Annette Wittkau, *Historismus. Zur Geschichte des Begriffs und des Problems* (Göttingen, 1992), 61-80.

ence of the historical process and with it their confidence in the quality of modern Western culture. Historicist thought from Ranke in the 1830s to Friedrich Meinecke in the 1930s had an ambivalent relation to the idea of progress. On the one hand the idea of progress was unacceptable from the perspective of those who stressed that every epoch must be seen in its own terms, “immediate to God,”²² but who on the other hand, like Ranke and Droysen, were as deeply convinced as Hegel of the solidity of modern Western culture or, like Meinecke, of the unique quality of German culture.

Ernst Troeltsch now spoke of the “Crisis of Historicism” (*Krisis des Historismus*).²³ Troeltsch accepted historicism as a valid scholarly approach to cultural reality, yet believed that the study of history, far from constituting the key to the acquisition of culture, progressively showed the relativity and hence invalidity of the values and beliefs of Western Culture. But historicism, the recognition that all human ideas and values are historically conditioned and subject to change, had become the dominant, inescapable attitude of the Western world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For Karl Mannheim it had become the very condition of modern existence.²⁴ Historicism was now part of the process of intellectualization and disenchantment of which Max Weber had spoken.²⁵ Mannheim, however, saw it less as a result of scientific inquiry than of the social transformation of the modern world with its destruction of traditional norms.

The discussion of the relativity of historical values had been initiated by Friedrich Nietzsche—though he did not use the term—in his essay on “The Uses and Disadvantages of History” (1874),²⁶ in which he chastised scholarly historical study as it had developed in German academia for its irrelevance and its paralyzing effect on human action. To much of nineteenth-century bourgeois culture, history had constituted the key to understanding things human, but to Nietzsche it seemed on the one hand there was no way out of history and on the other that history had no objective meaning. Troeltsch, a theologian by training, faced this dilemma in *The Absolute Truth of Christianity* (1902),²⁷ in which he recognized that the historical study of Christianity had destroyed the claim of Christianity to be the one true

²² See “On the Epochs of Modern History,” *The Theory and Practice of History*, 53.

²³ Ernst Troeltsch, “Die Krisis des Historismus,” in *Die Neue Rundschau*, 33. *Jahrgang der freien Bühne* (Berlin, 1922), I, 572-90, and “Der Historismus und seine Probleme (1922),” *Gesammelte Schriften* (Aalen, 1961), IV.

²⁴ Karl Mannheim, “Historismus,” in Kurt H. Wolf (ed.), *Wissenssoziologie. Auswahl aus dem Werk* (Neuwied, 1970).

²⁵ Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York, 1946), 138-39.

²⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin, 1972) “Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen,” I-III (1872-74), III, section 3.

²⁷ *Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte* (Tübingen, 1902).

religion, and pointed to the pluralism of beliefs. But Troeltsch wanted to give up neither his Christian faith nor his attachment to the culture of the West. For him there were two ways out of this dilemma, neither of which was intellectually convincing: one, which Troeltsch rejected, was to renounce a scholarly historical approach to the study of religion and of culture. Protestant theologians, among them Albrecht Ritschl,²⁸ chose this way by stressing that religion rested on faith alone. Karl Barth and the crisis theologians, Rudolf Bultmann, Friedrich Gogarten, and in America Reinhold Niebuhr, went further. Combining a stress on the total otherness of God with a radically pessimistic view of human nature and of the course of history, they negated the values of modern bourgeois culture which formed a key component in Troeltsch's *Kulturprotestantismus*.²⁹

Troeltsch chose to solve "the crisis of historicism" by arriving at a synthesis of Western values through a historical study of Western culture.³⁰ Yet this belief in the special dignity of the modern Western world, to which Troeltsch clung even after World War I, was increasingly untenable not only to the crisis theologians, who were willing to sacrifice their intellect to faith, but also to thinkers as different as Max Weber and Martin Heidegger, who stressed the total historicity of human existence with its relativistic implications. For Heidegger there was an escape in the safe haven of ontic Being which transcended logical thought,³¹ a remnant of the very metaphysical tradition Heidegger sought to repudiate; but for Weber, committed to a logic of scientific inquiry, rational thought, and science, history offered no answers to questions of values but revealed an ethically irrational world.³²

For Weber, as for Rickert,³³ the questions which scholars and scientists asked always derived from their value perspectives; and, as for Mannheim, all knowledge reflected a specific social and cultural context embedded in history. Our understanding of reality did not reflect this reality as it really was but answered the questions which the scholar and scientist had asked of it.³⁴ What remained unshakable for Weber were not the conclusions of scientific inquiry, which were constantly revised by further research, but rather the logic of scientific inquiry, which was both the specific product of

²⁸ Albrecht B. Ritschl, *A Critical History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation* (Edinburgh, 1872).

²⁹ See, e.g., "Die theologische und religiöse Lage der Gegenwart," in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Tübingen, 1913), II, 1-21.

³⁰ *Der Historismus und seine Überwindung* (Berlin, 1924).

³¹ *Sein und Zeit* (Halle, 1929); *Being and Time*, tr. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (New York, 1962).

³² Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," H. H. Gerth and C. Wright (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York, 1946), 121.

³³ Heinrich Rickert, *Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft* (Tübingen, 1921).

³⁴ Max Weber, "Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy," in *Max Weber on the Methodology of the Social Sciences*, ed. and tr. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (Glencoe, Ill., 1949), 170.

Western civilization and possessed universal validity.³⁵ From a somewhat similar perspective Hintze, in criticizing Troeltsch's attempt to overcome historical relativism through history, distinguished historicism as a *Weltanschauung* in Troeltsch's sense and historicism as a logical category of thought (*einer logischen Kategorialstruktur*).³⁶ The former is one among many philosophies, the latter has scientific validity.

Karl Heussi in *Die Krisis des Historismus* (1932) once more took stock of the discussions.³⁷ Friedrich Meinecke four years later in *Die Entstehung des Historismus* (1936) gave the term a very different, optimistic connotation which sought to overcome the crisis of historicism by stressing the positive aspects of a radically historical approach. Meinecke identified this approach with a specifically German intellectual tradition which replaced classical Western notions of natural law with a genetic outlook that focused on the role of uniqueness and "individuality" in history. Although certainly no supporter of National Socialism, Meinecke once more in 1936, three years after the accession of Hitler and shortly after the enactment of the Nuremberg racial laws, proclaimed the superiority of the German cultural tradition and saw in the German tradition of historicism the "highest attained stage in the understanding of things human," the most important intellectual development in Europe since the Reformation.³⁸ Going back to the neo-Platonism of the German classical period, particularly to Goethe, Meinecke sought to overcome the relativism of historicism in an ethereal world of culture in which politics, which had occupied an important place in his earlier history of ideas, now seemed no longer to matter after his disappointment with the course of twentieth-century history seemed. At the core of historicism lay the recognition of the irrational and spontaneous aspects of life with which the Western tradition of rational thought had been unable to deal.

Outside the German-speaking world historicism played a significant role in twentieth-century Italian thought with Benedetto Croce its most important representative.³⁹ Positions similar to Croce's *storicismo assoluto* were expounded by José Ortega y Gasset⁴⁰ in Spain and R. G. Collingwood⁴¹ in England. Like Meinecke, they held that a naturalistic world-view is totally

³⁵ Max Weber, "Objektivität," *Wissenschaftslehre*, 155.

³⁶ Otto Hintze, "Troeltsch und die Probleme des Historismus," in *Soziologie und Geschichte (Gesammelte Abhandlungen)*, II, sect. 2, (Göttingen, 1964), 366.

³⁷ Karl Heussi, *Die Krisis des Historismus* (Tübingen, 1932).

³⁸ *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, in *Werke* (Munich, 1959), III, 4.

³⁹ On the role of historicism in Italy and elsewhere, see Carlo Antoni, *Lo Storicismo*; Pietro Rossi, *Storia e storicismo nelle filosofia contemporanea* (rev. ed., Milan, 1991); and Giuseppe Cacciari, *Storicismo problematico e metodo critico* (Naples, 1993) and his *La lancia di Odino. Teorie e metodi della scienza storica tra Ottocento e Novecento*, preface by Giuseppe Galasso (Milan, 1994); see also David Roberts, *Benedetto Croce and the Uses of Historicism* (Berkeley, 1987).

⁴⁰ José Ortega y Gasset, *Historical Reason* (New York, 1984).

⁴¹ Collingwood, *The Idea of History*.

inadequate to understand human reality because of the uniqueness and individuality of the historical world. They agreed that "history is principally an act of thought" (Croce); but unlike Meinecke, who believed that the individual is "ineffable" and thus not susceptible to rational inquiry, Croce and Collingwood believed that thought itself had a rational structure, thus avoiding the radical subjectivism implicit in the German historicist concept of *Verstehen*. In postulating that history was "the story of liberty,"⁴² Croce's historicism was closer to that of Hegel than to that of Ranke or Meinecke.

This proximity to Hegel was maintained in subsequent Italian discussions of historicism. Contemporary with Croce, Giovanni Gentile stressed the centrality of Hegel's conception of the state and so gave historicism an essentially authoritarian orientation compatible with Fascist doctrine. Antonio Gramsci in the 1920s and 1930s interpreted historicism in Marxist terms as a philosophy of political engagement. In recent decades the discussion has gone in three very different directions. Maintaining the continuity with Croce, Giuseppe Galasso has given Croce's *storicismo assoluto* as the "story of liberty" a liberal and democratic connotation preferable as an intellectual and political approach to the modern analytical social sciences, Marxism, and *Historismus*.⁴³ Moving away from Croce, Fulvio Tessitore identifies himself with Meinecke's *Historismus* and stresses the significance of the German tradition for Italian thought and culture.⁴⁴ Pietro Rossi similarly stressed the contribution of the German tradition for modern social thought but singled out Max Weber as the most important thinker.⁴⁵ Most recently, Giuseppe Cacciatore, coming from a Marxist position, has critically reexamined the German discussions from Wilhelm von Humboldt to Ernst Cassirer.⁴⁶

Two other uses of the term should be mentioned briefly. Karl Popper in *The Poverty of Historicism* identified the term with the attempts by Hegel and Marx to formulate laws of historical development which were used by the Marxists to legitimize their authoritarian control for eschatological ends.⁴⁷ Popper's use of the term has been severely criticized as idiosyncratic, but in

⁴² Benedetto Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty* (London, 1941).

⁴³ See Giuseppe Galasso, *Croce, Gramsci e altri storici* (Milan, 1978) and *Croce e lo spirito del suo tempo* (Milan, 1991). On Croce, see also David D. Roberts, *Benedetto Croce and the Uses of Historicism* (Berkeley, 1987).

⁴⁴ Fulvio Tessitore, *I Fondamenti della filosofia politica di Humboldt* (Naples, 1965); *Meinecke, storico delle idee* (Florence, 1969); *Dimensioni dello storicismo* (Naples, 1971); *Filosofia e storiografia* (Naples, 1985); *Introduzione allo storicismo* (Bari, 1991); *Storiografia e storia della cultura* (Bologna, 1991).

⁴⁵ Pietro Rossi, *Lo storicismo tedesco contemporaneo* (Turin, 1956); also *Storia e storicismo nella filosofia contemporanea* (1960; expanded ed. Milano, 1991).

⁴⁶ Cacciatore, *Storicismo problematico e metodo critico*; also his *Ragione e speranze nel marxismo. L'eredità di Ernst Bloch* (Bari, 1979), and *La lancia di Odino: Teorie e metodi della storia in Italia e Germania tra '800 e '900* (Milan, 1994). The Italian discussions deserve more extensive treatment than I have been able to present here. I am thankful to Edoardo Tortarolo of Turin for introducing me to the recent Italian literature.

⁴⁷ Karl R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (New York, 1961).

fact he distinguished between “historicism” (*Historizismus*) and “historism” (*Historismus*) in the German sense at a time when “historism” was still the current term in the English-speaking world. Only in the 1940s, under the impact of Croce’s *storicismo*, did “historicism” normally replace “historism” in English.⁴⁸ The essay on “historicism” in the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*,⁴⁹ with its stress on “lawful development,” demonstrates that Marxist-Leninists, the objects of Popper’s criticism, understood the term “historicism” as Popper had defined it.

Most recently the term “New Historicism” has occurred in American literary discussions. These contain few references to the older continental discussions. They seek to overcome the suppression of the subject and of history in structuralist and poststructuralist thought. They share the post-modernist rejection of historical optimism as it was contained in both German historicist and Marxist thought, but urge a recognition of the “historical and cultural specificity of ideas”⁵⁰ largely lost in postmodernist thought.

The Crisis of Historicism

Otto Gerhard Oexle in his attempt to define historicism distinguished between Historicism I and Historicism II.⁵¹ Historicism I refers to the philosophic debates in the late nineteenth and the first third of the twentieth century which equated historical knowledge with relativism and saw in relativism an existential problem which needed to be solved if civilized life was to continue. Several recent works, Annette Wittkau’s *Historismus: Zur Geschichte des Begriffs und des Problems* (1992), Charles R. Bambach’s yet unpublished *Modernity and Crisis: German Philosophy and the Problems of Historicism 1880-1930* (manuscript completed 1993), and a number of articles by Otto Gerhardt Oexle⁵² and Wolfgang Hardtwig⁵³ have dealt with

⁴⁸ See Lee and Beck, “The Meaning of ‘Historicism’ ” (above, n. 1).

⁴⁹ See B. A. Grushin, “Historicism” (above, n. 1).

⁵⁰ See H. A. Veese (ed.), *The New Historicism* (New York, 1989); Paul Michael Lützeler, “Der postmoderne Historismus in den amerikanischen *Humanities*,” Hartmut Eggert et al. (eds.), *Geschichte als Literatur. Formen und Grenzen der Repräsentation von Vergangenheit* (Stuttgart, 1990), 67-76; Brook Thomas, *The New Historicism and Other Old-Fashioned Topics* (Princeton, 1991); Richard Wilson and Richard Dutton (eds.), *New Historicism and Renaissance Drama* (London, 1992); John H. Zammito, “Are We Being Theoretical Yet? The New Historicism, the New Philosophy of History, and ‘Practicing Historians,’” *Journal of Modern History*, 65 (1993), 783-814.

⁵¹ See Otto Gerhard Oexle, “Historismus” (above, n. 1) and “Die Geschichtswissenschaft im Zeichen des Historismus. Bemerkungen zum Standort der Geschichtsforschung,” *Historische Zeitschrift*, 238 (1984), 17-55; also Herbert Schnädelbach, *Geschichtsphilosophie nach Hegel. Die Probleme des Historismus* (Freiburg, 1974), making a similar distinction between two types of historicism.

⁵² See above, n. 41.

⁵³ Wolfgang Hardtwig, “Geschichtsreligion—Wissenschaft als Arbeit—Objektivität,” *Historische Zeitschrift*, 252 (1991), 1-32.

historicism from this perspective. The studies devoted to what Oexle calls Historicism II deal with a very different set of phenomena, with the German historical profession as it emerged in the nineteenth century. Using the Kuhnian term,⁵⁴ Jörn Rüsen and his students, Horst-Walter Blanke Schweers, Friedrich Jaeger, Dirk Fleischer, and Hans-Jürgen Pandel in a host of studies⁵⁵ have viewed historicism as a “paradigm”—in Rüsen’s terminology a “disciplinary matrix”⁵⁶—for historical studies. Ulrich Muhlack in *Geschichtswissenschaft im Humanismus und in der Aufklärung: Die Vorgeschichte des Historismus* (1991), to be followed by a volume on historicism proper, has similarly dealt with historicism as historical science (*Geschichtswissenschaft*).⁵⁷ Jeremy Telman, an American, completed a dissertation which calls into question various basic assumptions of this literature on the emergence of the historical profession.⁵⁸

The strength of Wittkau’s book lies in her examination of the problem of historicism as it is confronted not only among philosophers but in other disciplines as well: in theology, law, economics, sociology, and history. However, one is struck in Wittkau’s book as well as in much of the German literature which we have cited, by the almost total neglect of the non-German literature. After all, the problems of historicism were part of a broader crisis of consciousness in the modern Western world. In Wittkau’s case, not a single footnote or a single bibliographical entry refers to non-German thinkers—Croce, Collingwood, and Ortega y Gasset do not appear—nor is any of the important English- or Italian-language literature cited. For her as for Oexle and to a lesser extent Hardtwig, the source of the crisis of historicism resided in the growing application of scientific methods to historical study. The purpose of her book is to show, “that the phenomenon of historicism is closely connected in all the cultural science disciplines with the implementation of the empirico-scientific method of knowledge and that in the debate (*Auseinandersetzung*) with historicism the fundamental concern was the relativization of values as the result of advances in historical knowledge [*geschichtswissenschaftliche Erkenntnis*].”⁵⁹

Wittkau is correct in maintaining that the main persons with whom she deals in her book, e.g., Troeltsch and even Weber, saw the problem in these terms. But was the crisis really primarily the result of the advances of

⁵⁴ T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1970²).

⁵⁵ Including Jörn Rüsen, *Grundzüge einer Historik* (3 vols.; Göttingen, 1983-89) and *Konfigurationen des Historismus* (Frankfurt, 1993); Horst-Walter Blanke, *Historiographiegeschichte als Historik* (Stuttgart, 1991); Friedrich Jaeger and Jörn Rüsen, *Geschichte des Historismus* (Munich, 1992); Hans-Jürgen Pandel, *Historik und Didaktik* (Stuttgart, 1990).

⁵⁶ See *Grundzüge einer Historik* (3 vols; Göttingen, 1983-89).

⁵⁷ Munich.

⁵⁸ David Aaron Jeremy Telman, “Clio Ascendant: The Historical Profession in Nineteenth-Century Germany” (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1993).

⁵⁹ Annette Wittkau, *Historismus* (Göttingen, 1992), 22.

“scientific knowledge” as Wittkau maintains? Nietzsche’s critique of historical scholarship has been taken too seriously and too uncritically by Wittkau—and similarly by Oexle. Wittkau assumes too easily that historical study destroyed established values. But in fact professionalized historical studies generally in the nineteenth century led to the legitimation of established values, or in the case of socialist, nationalist, or racist writers to the legitimation of new values. Nietzsche’s assertion that historical study as it was practiced in his time paralyzed human action was simply not true. One might have hoped that critical historical study would unmask myths which had instrumentalized history in the service of political and social ideologies, but the opposite was generally the case. Historical study reinforced historical myths. The growing cultural relativism of the time with its questioning of older religious, social, and moral norms was much more the result of the transformation of modern society than its cause. As Karl Mannheim phrased it, “Historical writing did not give us historicism, rather the historical process has made us into historicists.”⁶⁰

For Wittkau, Weber, who actually does not use the term, solves the problem which historicism has posed of the reconciliation of science and values once and for all, showing that “knowledge in the cultural sciences [*kulturwissenschaftliche Erkenntnis*] offers no answers to questions of norms, but consists exclusively of knowledge of facts.”⁶¹ From now on, she notes, “value knowledge becomes a matter of personal belief.”⁶² Yet this, in my opinion, makes Weber into too much of a positivist. Weber’s *verstehende Soziologie* presupposed that the cultural sciences or, to use Weber’s terminology, the social sciences, dealt not with “facts” (*Tatsachen*) but with systems of meaning which required qualitative methods of “understanding.” For Weber social science thus went beyond the empirical facts to meaningful entities. These, as we know, could be understood for Weber not through direct observation but by means of “ideal types” which the social scientist formulated in order to impose a structure on the chaos of empirical data. Far from putting an end to speculation, as Wittkau believed Weber had done, he in fact presented a highly speculative system with which he sought to make social processes comprehensible. Nor was the distinction between fact and value as absolute in Weber as it appears; we must be careful not to take Weber’s statement uncritically at its face value. Values for him rested on decisions, but in so far as decisions were made in the face of harsh reality, they were determined for Weber by an objective world of conflict which took on a very Social Darwinist and openly masculine coloring which led Weber

⁶⁰ Karl Mannheim, “Historismus” (1924), *Wissenssoziologie (Soziologische Texte, Band 28)*, Auswahl aus dem Werk, 2. Ausg. (Neuwied, 1970), 247f, and *Das Problem einer Soziologie des Wissens* (1925), *ibid.*, 308ff.

⁶¹ Wittkau, *Historismus*, 132.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 145.

to endorse Germany's striving for world power not merely on the grounds of personal decisions but of scientific judgment.⁶³

Oexle and Hardtwig followed lines similar to that of Wittkau in stressing that Weber's great achievement lay in understanding that it was methodology rather than its findings which gave science, including social science, its scientific character. Science thus coincided with "research" (*Forschung*). With this insight, Hardtwig notes, science thus understood enters into irrevocable opposition to the older historicist conceptions of history which saw history as a source of culture (*Bildung*) and assigned to historical science the task of establishing norms.⁶⁴ The move from history as *Bildung* to history as *Forschung*, both Hardtwig and Oexle maintain, began in the course of the nineteenth century when history began to view itself as a rigorous discipline. Not only Oexle and Hardtwig but also Rüsen and his students⁶⁵ accord Droysen the honor of having recognized the research character of historical science in his famous formulation: "The essence of historical method consists in understanding through research" (*Das Wesen der historischen Methode ist forschend zu verstehen*). For Droysen the aim of scientific research therefore is not empirical knowledge but in his language "interpretation" (*Interpretation*). But meaningful interpretation is possible for Droysen only because he, like Ranke, assumes that there are underlying forces which give coherence to history. As Hardtwig observes, Droysen on the one hand recognizes that the historian does not merely confront his object but is a part of it,⁶⁶ in Droysen's own words, that "the content of our self [*Ich*] is in many ways a product [*Resultat*] of history."⁶⁷ But on the other hand Droysen is also convinced that there is a basic harmony between subject and object which enables the historian to obtain firm knowledge. One can thus hardly maintain, as Wittkau did, that Droysen freed himself from a speculative philosophy of history.⁶⁸

Oexle and Hardtwig rightly maintain that the older historicism was objectivistic despite, or perhaps because of, its idealistic presuppositions. Weber emphatically rejected this objectivism in proceeding from the Kantian premise that reality can be known only by means of the categories of our reason, never as a thing in itself. There are no universally valid values; on the other hand "without the researchers value ideas [*Wertideen*], there would be no principle of selection of the subject matter and no meaningful knowledge

⁶³ Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Max Weber and German Politics* (Chicago, 1984); Guenther Roth, "Between Cosmopolitanism and Ethnocentrism: Max Weber in the Nineties," to appear in *Telos*, 96 (1993), 148-62.

⁶⁴ Hardtwig, "Geschichtsreligion—Wissenschaft als Arbeit—Objektivität," 24.

⁶⁵ See above, n. 45; also Jörn Rüsen, *Begriffene Geschichte. Genesis und Begründung der Geschichtstheorie J. G. Droysens* (Paderborn, 1969).

⁶⁶ Hardtwig, "Geschichtsreligion—Wissenschaft als Arbeit—Objektivität," 21.

⁶⁷ Zitiert in Oexle, *Die Geschichtswissenschaft*, 43.

⁶⁸ Wittkau, *Historismus*, 59.

of concrete individual reality.” Thus, while Weber considers social science “a science of reality” (*Wirklichkeitswissenschaft*), he admits that there is no “‘objective’ scientific analysis of cultural life ... independent of special and ‘onesided’ perspectives [*Gesichtspunkte*].”⁶⁹

But the question remains whether Weber in fact freed himself from the speculative assumptions of objectivity and historical coherence central to the historicist outlook to the extent that Oexle and Hardtwig maintain. On the one hand, according to Weber, no one can believe any longer that the world has a meaning (*Sinn*),⁷⁰ but on the other hand he is convinced in best Neo-Kantian fashion that rational and objective knowledge is possible. Thus for him the very character of science and scientific research excludes any finality, but at the same time guarantees progress. While a great work of art is never antiquated, scientific findings inevitably will be. “Scientific work is chained to the course of p r o g r e s s [Weber’s emphasis].”⁷¹ What makes this progress possible for Weber is his firm Kantian conviction in the validity of scientific method. He recognized that this method is historically bound up with a specific culture, that of the West, but at the same time he is convinced that “it is and will remain true that methodologically correct proof in the social sciences, if it is to achieve its purpose, must be acknowledged as correct even by a Chinese, who, on the other hand, may be deaf to our conception of the ethical imperative.”⁷²

One could question, however, whether this form of reasoning would be equally comprehensible to a medieval mystic or a nomadic hunter. As the work of Thomas Kuhn⁷³ suggests, the history of science in recent years has questioned Weber’s fundamental assumptions much more radically than Wittkau, Oexle and Hardwig’s treatment of him would suggest. Moreover, despite his insistence that the world has no meaning (*Sinn*) in an objective sense, Weber’s conception of the unity of scientific method and the “process of intellectualization which we have been undergoing for thousands of years”⁷⁴ still endows history with a grand narrative. History thus still possesses a coherence, even if not a meaning.

Charles R. Bambach has recently examined a strain in German thought which radically questions the remnants of this coherence as they are contained in Neo-Kantian thought.⁷⁵ The first half of the manuscript goes over familiar ground, the Neo-Kantian philosophers, Dilthey, Windelband, and Rickert, for whom the problems raised by historical studies are of an episte-

⁶⁹ Max Weber, “Objectivity in Social Science,” 170.

⁷⁰ Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” *ibid.* 137.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁷² “Objectivity in Social Science,” 58.

⁷³ *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

⁷⁴ Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” 138.

⁷⁵ “Modernity and Crisis: German Philosophy and the Problems of Historicism 1880-1930,” unpublished manuscript.

mological nature and require an epistemological solution. The second half of the manuscript deals with a discussion introduced by phenomenology (Husserl) and crisis theology (Barth), for which the fundamental questions no longer involve the certainty of knowledge but the search for meaning. Barth, building on Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, had pointed at the hollowness of the ideal of *Bildung*, which for Troeltsch still remained sacred and worthy of preservation; Husserl understood the genuine cause of cultural upheaval as the crisis of science itself, the incompatibility between the objective claims of science and the subjective element of the life-world.

For Bambach the key figure in this discussion is no longer Weber, who is not even mentioned, but Heidegger. By recasting the historicist's epistemological question about the objectivity of historical knowledge as an ontological question about the meaning of historical being, Heidegger, Bambach argues, began to deconstruct the entire traditional discourse of Western philosophy since Socrates. The conception of the self-conscious, autonomous *cogito* which lay at the core of modern metaphysics, was declared bankrupt. The grand narrative of unity, meaning, and totality in a reality conceived as history is now replaced by the awareness of fragmentation, crisis and rupture. Bambach ponders to what extent Heidegger, in "dismantl[ing] the metaphysics of crisis-thinking, initiated a new kind of crisis, political in scope,"⁷⁶ which led him to National Socialism. It seems to me that neither Husserl nor Heidegger dismantled Western metaphysics as radically as Bambach suggests. Husserl, in his search for a rigorous science which would overcome the fragmentation of reality which empirical science had produced, took refuge in a search for the underlying essence (*Wesensschau*), while Heidegger sought solace in a *Sein* which provided a *Geborgenheit* from the unpleasant intellectual and political perplexities of the modern world. Heidegger's phenomenology was thus not a heroic confrontation with the absurdities of modern existence but rather an unheroic escape from them.

Historicism as a Historiographical Movement

Since Meinecke's *Entstehung des Historismus* historicism has been identified less with the problems of historical relativism than with the discipline of history as it developed in the nineteenth century in Germany and with the professionalization of historical studies that became a model also outside of Germany. It must be noted, however, that no historians prior to Meinecke characterized what they were doing as historicism. Henceforth the term was applied to the German academic tradition of writing history. History as it became a professional discipline in Germany took over a great deal of the manner and outlook of other scientific disciplines, including those

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 236.

in the natural sciences, that is, the research imperative and the commitment to “objective” methods of inquiry needed to elevate it to the rank of a rigorous science (Droysen).⁷⁷ This commitment to objectivity was as central to the new historical profession as it was to other segments of the scientific community. The task of the historian, as Ranke formulated it, was “to show what actually happened” (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*).⁷⁸ It recognized the fundamental difference between the natural sciences which sought to explain “the recurrent general” and the historical or cultural sciences which required hermeneutic methods of understanding (*Verstehen*) that took into account that human behavior and institutions reflected unique constellations of meaning (*Sinnhaftigkeit*).⁷⁹ Historicism has thus come to be identified narrowly with the tradition of historical studies in Germany from Ranke to the second third of the twentieth century, a tradition which has been closely tied to the affirmation of the German nation state as it emerged under the leadership of Bismarck. Although many aspects of social and cultural life, the economy, religion, law, art, and others were approached historically within this tradition, the state was seen as the central institution which provided a thread for a historical narrative.

Two questions have occupied a central role in the recent literature on the form of historicism which we have just examined. One has involved the relationship between theory, scholarly practice, and politics, specifically the extent to which historicism as a scholarly tradition could be separated from its link to a specific political tradition. The second has involved the place which historicism has occupied in the emergence of modern forms of historical science. The political function of historicism has been recognized both by its defenders and its critics. Meinecke, in the face of his disillusionment with the political development of the modern world in the wake of the First World War,⁸⁰ made a sharp division between culture and politics, which in his earlier work had been intimately related,⁸¹ and now saw historicism as a purely cultural phenomenon. But a broad current of writers acknowledged the link between the philosophical assumptions of the established German historiographical tradition and German politics. These writers identified this approach to history and the cultural sciences as a specifically German perspective, superior to that of the West, which was supposedly committed to concepts of natural law and to analytical forms of social science. During the

⁷⁷ Johann Gustav Droysen, “Erhebung der Geschichte zum Rang einer Wissenschaft” in *Historik* (above, n. 17), 451-69.

⁷⁸ See Ranke’s preface to his *Histories of the Latin and Germanic Nations*.

⁷⁹ Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte*, 636-37.

⁸⁰ “Die Idee der Staatsräson,” (first published in 1924) in *Werke*, I (Munich, 1957), 1. Translated as *Machiavellism: The Doctrine of Raison d’Etat and Its Place in Modern History*, intro. W. Stark, tr. Douglas Scott (New Haven, 1957).

⁸¹ Preface to second edition (1911) of *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat. Studien zur Genesis des deutschen Nationalstaates*, as V, *Werke*, V (Munich, 1962).

First World War this was a central concept of professorial propaganda, to which Meinecke and Troeltsch contributed, contrasting the German "Ideas of 1914," of which this view of history was a part, with the Western "Ideas of 1789."⁸²

This conception of history had little to do with the pessimistic view that historical study contributed to the relativization and destruction of the values of Western and German culture. Without using the term historicism, Georg von Below traced the development of this tradition in German historical writing, which he labeled romantic. Meinecke in 1936 reaffirmed this faith.⁸³ Nor, if we judge the post-1945 writings of von Srbik and Gerhard Ritter, did the Nazi experience destroy this attachment to German intellectual and political traditions.⁸⁴ Beginning in the 1960s, however, historicism was viewed by a generation of historians who saw the German past critically as part of an ideology which had contributed to the disastrous way Germany had travelled in the twentieth century. Eckart Kehr had already introduced this critical note in his essay of 1933 on German historiography.⁸⁵ A new generation of historians in the 1960s and early 1970s, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Wolfgang Mommsen, Jürgen Kocka, Georg Iggers, and others, criticized this form of historicism not only on political but also on methodological grounds. A narrative history of politics could not provide an adequate explanation of the forces which led to the German catastrophe. These required a "historical social science" (*historische Sozialwissenschaft*)⁸⁶ which analyzed the structural framework in which German politics operated. By the mid-1980s this social scientific approach was questioned both by historians who wanted to shake off the burden of German guilt and "normalize" or "historicize" (*historisieren*)⁸⁷ the German past and by populist historians of everyday life (*Alltagshistoriker*)⁸⁸ who wanted to recapture the historical experiences of average human beings who had been ignored in the older political narrative as well as in the focus on impersonal structures and processes of the social science oriented historians.

⁸² See Otto Hintze et al. (eds.), *Deutschland und der Weltkrieg* (Leipzig, 1915), mit Beiträgen von Friedrich Meinecke, Hans Delbrück, Hermann Oncken, Erich Marcks, Gustav von Schmoller, Wilhelm Solf, Ernst Troeltsch, et al.

⁸³ Von Below, *Die deutsche Geschichtsschreibung von den Befreiungskriegen bis zu unseren Tagen. Geschichte und Kulturgeschichte* (Leipzig, 1916).

⁸⁴ E.g., Heinrich Ritter von Srbik, *Geist und Geschichte vom deutschen Humanismus bis zur Gegenwart* (2 vols.; Munich, 1950-51); Gerhard Ritter, *Die Dämonieder Macht*, (Munich, 1948).

⁸⁵ See Eckart Kehr, "Neuere deutsche Geschichtsschreibung," in *Der Primat der Innenpolitik* (Berlin, 1970), 254-68.

⁸⁶ Hans Ulrich Wehler, *Modernisierungstheorie und Geschichte* (Göttingen, 1975).

⁸⁷ Martin Broszat, "Was heisst Historisierung des Nationalsozialismus," *Historische Zeitschrift*, 247 (1988), 1-14.

⁸⁸ See Alf Lütke (ed.), *Alltagsgeschichte. Zur Rekonstruktion historischer Erfahrungen und Lebensweisen* (Frankfurt, 1989); Winfried Schultze (ed.), *Sozialgeschichte, Alltagsgeschichte, Mikro-Historie* (Göttingen, 1994).

The literature of the past ten years dealing with historicism as historical science (*Geschichtswissenschaft*), as it emerged as a professional discipline at the nineteenth-century German university, has gone in three different directions. One (Muhlack, Nipperdey) continues to maintain that historicism so conceived continues to be a valid model for scholarship; a second (Rüsen, Blanke, Jäger) recognizes the contributions historicism has made to modern historical science but also recognizes its limits; a third (Hardtwig, Oexle, Iggers) probes the extra-scientific political and philosophical (in fact theological) presuppositions which compromised the scientific discourse of the professional historians.

The most ambitious example of the first direction is Ulrich Muhlack's already mentioned *Geschichtswissenschaft im Humanismus und in der Aufklärung: Die Vorgeschichte des Historismus* (1991). For Muhlack as for Meinecke, historicism still constitutes the highest form of historical understanding attained to this point; and like Meinecke, Muhlack sees historicism as an achievement of German culture.⁸⁹ He explains the emergence of historicism as a development within historiographical thought and practice relatively unaffected by external political or social factors, although he recognizes the impact of the French Revolution on historical thought.⁹⁰ For him the "emergence of a modern science of history [*Geschichtswissenschaft*] coincided with the emergence of historicism at the turn from the 18th to the 19th century."⁹¹ Proceeding from Germany and being a product of a specifically German movement of thought, historicism played a crucial role in the "modernization of the discipline"⁹² throughout the world. Prior to historicism there was no science of history in any serious sense. Historicism laid the foundations for a scientific treatment of history by cleansing it from value judgments and ending its function as *magistra vitae*, thus making it possible to recreate the past as it is. Muhlack accepts the assumption of classical historicism that "the general exists only in the individual," that immersion into the individual establishes links to the whole, that there is "only one history" (*eine einzige Geschichte*), which through historical inquiry "can be explained, understood, and which is filled with meaning."⁹³ Eschewing the exemplary function of the older history, which permitted only "probable knowledge" (*wahrscheinliche Erkenntnis*), historicism makes possible "true knowledge" (*wahre Erkenntnis*).⁹⁴ Muhlack reasserts the German historicist conception of the centrality of the nation in history as the "form in which

⁸⁹ See, e.g., Ulrich Muhlack, *Geschichtswissenschaft im Humanismus und in der Aufklärung. Die Vorgeschichte des Historismus* (Munich, 1991), 10.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 415.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 10; see also Jaeger and Rüsen, *Geschichte des Historismus*, 3.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 424.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 421.

mankind exists" (*Daseinsform der Menschheit*), the priority of the state, and the decisive role of great individuals.⁹⁵

Nipperdey in an article in 1975 sought to defend historicism against the critical social scientific school in the Federal Republic who, in his words, had accused it of being "unmodern, unscientific, ideological, and reactionary,"⁹⁶ and maintained that once historicism had freed itself from its early nineteenth-century philosophical and political assumptions, it could serve as the basis of a modern historical science. In his monumental three-volume German history from 1800 to 1918, Nipperdey succeeds in translating historicist principles into practice but at the same time, particularly in the last volume, operates with the very philosophic and political assumptions of which he wanted to free historicism.⁹⁷

The many works which have appeared in the past several years from the circle around Jörn Rüsen, including Friedrich Jaeger and Jörn Rüsen's *Geschichte des Historismus* (1992),⁹⁸ Rüsen's collection of essays, *Konfigurationen des Historismus* (1993),⁹⁹ and Horst-Walter Blanke's massive *Historiographiegeschichte als Historik* (1991),¹⁰⁰ share Muhlack's belief that historicism occupied the central role in the establishment of what they consider to be a "paradigm" for modern historical science, although they place historicism into a broader historical context in which its limits become apparent. Historicism, they note, "is part of a comprehensive process of modernization" which is also a process of scientification (*Verwissenschaftlichung*). Historicism, which recognizes that all human reality is historical in nature, constitutes the "specifically modern form of historical thinking."¹⁰¹ It recognizes "the uniqueness of the past as distinct from the present" and at the same time "the overarching connectedness of different epochs."¹⁰² Like Muhlack they maintain their faith in a coherent historical narrative open to historical study.

These scholars see the characteristics of a scientific history in similar terms. Historicism ceases to see history as *magistra vitae* and frees history from rhetoric. Historical thinking becomes "scientific when it follows definite rules which guarantee the possibility of testing its statements about the past, thus its objectivity, and assure a continuous growth in knowledge about the past, in other words a progress of knowledge."¹⁰³ Rüsen and Jaeger are

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 428.

⁹⁶ Thomas Nipperdey, *Gesellschaft, Kultur, Theorie: Gesammelte Aufsätze zur neuen Geschichte*, vol. 18, in *Kritische Studien zur Geschichtswissenschaft* (Göttingen, 1976).

⁹⁷ Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1800-1866* (Munich, 1983) and *Deutsche Geschichte 1866-1918* (2 vols.; Munich, 1990-92).

⁹⁸ (Munich, 1992).

⁹⁹ (Frankfurt a/M, 1993).

¹⁰⁰ Horst-Walter Blanke, *Historiographiegeschichte als Historik* (Stuttgart, 1991).

¹⁰¹ Jaeger and Rüsen, *Geschichte des Historismus*, 7.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 41.

thus little worried about the uncertainty of scientific knowledge and the fragmentation of history which haunt postmodernist thought. Historicism, they believe, however must be understood historically, that is, in its time, as a “paradigm” which controlled historical science in the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century not only in Germany but internationally. Yet for them it also reflects the limitations of its time. Blanke distinguishes three paradigms which succeed each other, that of Enlightenment historiography, historicism, and finally the Historical Social Science of which we have spoken above. Historicism represented a scientific advance over Enlightenment because it introduced a more radically historical view of human reality and in the process of professionalization developed more rigorous methods of historical inquiry. At the same time, under the impact of nationalism, it gave up the broad cosmopolitan view of the Enlightenment and the latter’s interest in culture and society. Its vision was narrowed by its involvement in the German political status quo of its time. Historical Social Science revived concerns of Enlightenment historiography, but gave them a more rigorous social scientific form.

This conception of the succession of three paradigms, each of which determines the major part of historical inquiry in a certain historical period, was recently sharply attacked by Oexle in a review essay of Blanke’s book.¹⁰⁴ Blanke is undoubtedly right that, at least in the academy, there was a remarkable uniformity in historical, methodological, and political conceptions from the emergence of historicism at the universities until the massive critique of these conceptions after the early 1960s. Moreover, as Wolfgang Weber has sought to demonstrate by his examination of recruitment practices from the early nineteenth century to 1970, mechanisms of discipline and academic influence guaranteed a remarkable degree of ideological conformity in the German universities over this period. Blanke’s book is the most informative and comprehensive history of German historiography to date. But Oexle is undoubtedly right that Blanke’s succession of paradigms overlooks the diversities which existed nevertheless and sees the history of historical writing too narrowly from the perspective of the German university.

Muhlack, Rösen, and Blanke are still deeply impressed by the scientific character of the historiography they identify with historicism. Other recent contributions by Hardtwig,¹⁰⁵ Oexle,¹⁰⁶ and Iggers¹⁰⁷ cast doubt on the self-

¹⁰⁴ Otto Gerhard Oexle, “Göttingen-Bielefeld einfach,” *Rechtshistorisches Journal*, 11 (1992), 54-66; Blanke’s reply, “‘Historismus’ im Streit. Oder: Wie schreibt man heute eine Geschichte der Geschichtswissenschaft,” *Rechtshistorisches Journal*, 12 (1993), 585-97.

¹⁰⁵ See above, n. 53.

¹⁰⁶ See above, n. 51.

¹⁰⁷ Iggers, “Ist es in Deutschland in der Tat früher zur Verwissenschaftlichung der Geschichte gekommen als in anderen Ländern,” to appear in J. Rösen (ed.), *Geschichtsdiskurs*, II (Frankfurt, 1964), 73-86.

assertions by German historians of their scientific objectivity. For Rüsen, Droysen plays a crucial role in the transformation of history into a rigorous science.¹⁰⁸ Droysen formulates the methodological guidelines which permit the transition of history from the empirical data, reconstructed through the critical examination of the sources, to the insight into the greater historical contexts. This insight requires a hermeneutical approach, the historian's immersion into the mental world of the agents of history. The possibility of reconstructing the past by hermeneutic means—by “interpretation” in Droysen's words—assumes that there is a real mental coherence (*Zusammenhang*) which can be grasped. Ranke remarked that in history there are “spiritual, life-giving, creative forces,” or “moral energies.” “They cannot be defined or put in abstract terms, but one can behold them and observe them.”¹⁰⁹

Droysen is more aware than Ranke of the limits of objective knowledge, writing that “historical research presupposes the insight that also the content of our self [*Ich*] is in many ways a mediated product of history.” But he also preserves faith in his objectivity:

Of course, I shall not want to solve the great tasks of historical presentation from my arbitrary subjectivity or my small and petty personality. But when I look at the past from the standpoint of my people, state, or religion, I stand high above my own self. I think, as it were, from a higher Self, in which the slugs of my own petty person have melted away.¹¹⁰

Hardtwig thus could argue that historicism in its German form was far removed from the sober, non-speculative approach which it claimed for itself, and deeply immeshed in religion and theology.¹¹¹

Nipperdey's assertion, with which Muhlack would agree, that historicism dissolved all transcendence and knew only “immanent historical processes,”¹¹² clearly does not hold for the German historicist tradition of historiography from Ranke to Meinecke and Ritter. For Humboldt, Ranke, and Droysen history is given coherence by “ideas” and “moral forces” (*sittliche Mächte*) which reflect divine will. This will may operate mysteriously and remains inscrutable but nevertheless makes historical cognition possible. “I am so permeated with God's almighty reign,” the young Droysen wrote to his publisher Friedrich Perthes, “that I believe that not

¹⁰⁸ Throughout Rüsen's writings, beginning with *Begriffene Geschichte. Genesis und Begründung der Geschichtstheorie J. G. Droysens* (Paderborn, 1969); see also Droysen (above, n. 68).

¹⁰⁹ “The Great Powers,” 100.

¹¹⁰ *Vorlesungen über die Freiheitskriege*, I (Kiel, 1846), 287.

¹¹¹ Wolfgang Hardtwig, “Geschichtsreligion.”

¹¹² Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1866-1918*, I, 637.

even a hair can fall from any head without His willing it."¹¹³ Iggers has pointed at the political implications of this religion of history for the justification of existing relations of political and social power.¹¹⁴

Hardtwig and Oexle have also noted that despite their philosophic idealism, the historians in the historicist tradition had an essentially objectivistic conception of their science. On the one hand they rejected the attempt of Hegelian philosophy and of late nineteenth-century natural science to formulate laws and emphasized the role of spontaneity and freedom in history. On the other hand they accepted a great deal of the *habitus* of the natural scientists in invoking the authority of the professionalized established historian to speak on history. Ranke, as we have seen, was confident that it was possible on the basis of the careful and exhaustive examination of the sources to show "wie es eigentlich gewesen."

As we have also seen, Droysen, despite his awareness of the role of subjectivity in historical cognition, was equally convinced that methodical historical study would reveal historical truth. Despite their philosophical idealism, the historians were closer to the world view of Positivism and Marxism than they realized. Droysen criticized Buckle not for believing that there is progress in history but because Buckle's naturalistic approach to history was irreconcilable with meaningful progress.¹¹⁵ Similarly, Dilthey and the Neo-Kantians sought a logic of inquiry which would recognize the role of meaning in cultural life but which would also introduce a scientific rigor similar to that of the natural sciences. For Blanke one of the great deficits of historicism was its relative neglect of the social and cultural concerns which had occupied many historians during the Enlightenment; for Hardtwig and Oexle it was the loss of the perspectivistic view of knowledge of Chladenius, Gatterer, and other Enlightenment thinkers and its replacement by objectivistic conceptions of science.

This leads to two other questions in the recent literature on historicism, namely, when history became a scientific enterprise (*Wissenschaft*) and when it became a professionalized discipline. For Muhlack the answer is very clear: at the turn of the nineteenth century with the emergence of historicism as a world view and a scholarly practice. Without historicism, he believes, no historical science in the modern sense was possible. The Enlightenment for Muhlack had a moralistic, static view of the past and historicism a genetic one. The Enlightenment projected its set of values on the past while historiography in the tradition of historicism refrained from this. Yet the fact that few strains of historical writing were as ideologically and politically committed as the Prussian School, including Droysen, leave Muhlack's observation little credence. By now a considerable literature exists, from Dilthey's "Das

¹¹³ Droysen to Perthes, 1836, quoted in Iggers, *German Conception of History*, 105.

¹¹⁴ *The German Conception of History*.

¹¹⁵ *Grundriss der Historik* (Leipzig, 1868), 59-60.

achtzehnte Jahrhundert und die geschichtliche Welt"¹¹⁶ and Ernst Cassirer's *Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (1932)¹¹⁷ to Peter Reill's *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (1975),¹¹⁸ which shows that the Enlightenment was by now means unhistorical. Reill has stressed the continuity in the transition from Enlightenment to historicism.

The contributors to the volume *Geschichte und Aufklärung* (1986) came to similar conclusions for the most part.¹¹⁹ Blanke¹²⁰ and Iggers¹²¹ have pointed out the occupation of the eighteenth-century historians, particularly the Göttingen school, with social and cultural history, their use of anthropological, linguistic, economic, demographic, and statistical concepts. Konrad Jarausch has examined early, incomplete forms of professionalization.¹²² Yet they warn against modernizing eighteenth-century historical work. Jeremy Telman makes this point convincingly in his recent dissertation on the professionalization of historical studies. Employing the concept of professionalization generally used in the sociological literature¹²³ and using statistical evidence, he concludes that the *Vormärz* in Prussia "was the period and the place in which historians established their own professional institutions as well as their own scientific [*wissenschaftliche*] methodology,"¹²⁴ a period which coincided with the establishment of historicism "as the dominant paradigm for historical scholarship in nineteenth-century Germany."¹²⁵

Professionalization should not, however, be as closely identified with scientification (*Verwissenschaftlichung*) as it is by Rüsen and Blanke. The English language, by preferring to speak of historical scholarship rather than historical science, permits more nuances than the German term *Geschichtswissenschaft*. Various scientific or scholarly strategies committed to honest historical understanding are possible among which the German historicist variety was only one. Thus historians in France, Scotland, England, Göttingen, and elsewhere who did not meet Telman's criteria of pro-

¹¹⁶ *Gesammelte Schriften* (Leipzig, 1927), III, 209-68.

¹¹⁷ (Boston, 1951).

¹¹⁸ (Berkeley).

¹¹⁹ Hans Erich Bödeker, et al. (eds.), *Aufklärung und Geschichte. Studien zur deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft* (Göttingen, 1986).

¹²⁰ Blanke, *Historiographieggeschichte als Historik*.

¹²¹ Iggers, "Die Göttinger Historiker und die Geschichtswissenschaft des 18. Jahrhunderts" in Siegfried Bahne et al. (eds.), *Mentalitäten und Lebensverhältnisse. Beispiele aus der Sozialgeschichte der Neuzeit. (Rudolf Vierhaus zum 60. Geburtstag)* (Göttingen, 1982); "The University of Göttingen 1760-1800 and the Transformation of Historical Scholarship," *Storia della Storiografia*, 2 (1982), 11-37.

¹²² Konrad H. Jarausch, "The Institutionalization of History in 18th-Century Germany," in Bödeker et al., *Aufklärung und Geschichte*, 25-49.

¹²³ Telman, "Clio Ascendant," 79.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

professionalization nevertheless wrote significant historical works with a solid scholarly foundation. Similarly, there is a danger in identifying the development of historical “science” in the nineteenth century as closely with the German historicist paradigm as Rüsen and Muhlack have done. The very diverse work of de Tocqueville, Burckhardt, Fustel de Coulanges, Marx, Lorenz von Stein, and Max Weber showed that historical studies could go in very different directions.

One shortcoming of much of the literature we have discussed in this essay is that it has had too much of a German orientation. The “worldwide triumphant procession” (*universale Siegeszug*)¹²⁶ of German historical science which Muhlack celebrated may have proven to be hollower than he realized. At least in the academic discipline of history in nineteenth and much of twentieth-century Germany, historians isolated themselves from many currents of contemporary thought. This undoubtedly had something to do with the political and sociological context in which intellectual life functioned in Germany.¹²⁷

Historicism Today

In conclusion, a good deal of work remains to be done on the role of historicism in the history of ideas and of historiography in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Studies on historicism have for the most part been written almost exclusively on Germany and have reflected German perspectives. But historicism, as Carlo Antoni demonstrated many years ago,¹²⁸ was a movement and an outlook which transcended the German-language realm. In two areas further study is very much needed. First, further work must be done on the role of historicist ideas and presuppositions in the historiography of non-German speaking countries. Such studies exist almost solely for Italy.¹²⁹ Second, there is a need for more study on the continuing relevance of a historicist outlook for contemporary thought. Much of recent German literature on the relevance of historicism has been disappointing in this respect in not seriously considering the challenge which recent historical

¹²⁶ Muhlack, 10.

¹²⁷ See Otto Gerhard Oexle, “Ein politischer Historiker: Georg von Below” in Notker Hammerstein (ed.), *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft um 1900* (Stuttgart, 1988), 283-312, in which he raises the question of why Germany was replaced in the twentieth century by France as the leader in medieval studies.

¹²⁸ Antoni, *Dallo storicismo alla sociologia* and *Lo storicismo*.

¹²⁹ On Italy, see above, notes 43 to 46. On Great Britain, see Klaus Dockhorn, *Deutscher Historismus in England. Ein Beitrag zur englischen Geistesgeschichte* (Göttingen, 1950); on America, see Jürgen Herbst, *The German Historical School in American Scholarship: A Study in the Transfer of Culture* (Ithaca, 1965); on China, Qingjia Wang, “Chinese Historians and the West: The Origins of Modern Chinese Historiography” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Syracuse, 1992).

thought has presented to traditional conceptions of history.¹³⁰ The collapse not only of the idealistic assumptions of the meaningfulness of history upon which classical historicism rested but also of the *Bildungswelt* in which it was anchored have made forms of “postmodernist” thought credible which have questioned not only the coherence of history but also the possibility of truthful cognitive approximation of this past.¹³¹ For those who are unwilling to acquiesce to this surrender of intellect, the attempts by thinkers in the tradition of historicist thought from Ranke and Droysen to Weber and Gadamer to formulate a logic of inquiry for the cultural sciences may provide a rational core for historians who continue to believe with Weber that history is a *Wirklichkeitswissenschaft* with all the methodological complexities which such a *Wissenschaft* entails.

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¹³⁰ Jörn Rüsen, in his theoretical approach to narrativity, less so in his historical account of the history of historicism, has come closest to dealing with this challenge. See Allan Megill, “Jörn Rüsen’s Theory of Historiography Between Modernism and Rhetorical Inquiry,” *History and Theory*, 33 (1994), 39-60; see the Dutch philosopher of history, F. R. Ankersmit, “Historism: An Attempt at Synthesis,” *History and Theory* (forthcoming, 1995), with a reply by Georg G. Iggers and a response by Ankersmit to Iggers’s reply.

¹³¹ See F. R. Ankersmit, “Historiography and Postmodernism,” *History and Theory*, 28 (1989), 137-53; also “Historism: An Attempt at Synthesis.”