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Nineteenth-Century Historicism and Its Predecessors

Historical Experience, Historical Ontology and Historical Method

Jacques Bos

The term 'historicism' has a wide variety of meanings. Karl Popper used this word to denote the view that the course of history is determined by transparent general laws and that knowledge of these laws makes it possible to predict social developments.[1] Popper's determinist notion of historicism is, however, highly idiosyncratic. It is more customary to use the term 'historicism' as a label for a specific strand of historical writing that emerged in Germany in the early nineteenth century and subsequently became a leading perspective in the academic historiography of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, primarily in Germany, but also in other countries. It should be noted, however, that the word *Historismus* was not frequently used in German until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when it gained currency in a debate on the historical relativity of values.[2] In this debate, which continued in the first decades of the twentieth century, the historicist perspective on human culture as a fundamentally historical phenomenon became connected with the idea that human values were subject to change. For intellectuals such as Ernst Troeltsch this was a reason to speak of a 'crisis of historicism'.[3]

It is disputed what exactly is involved in nineteenth-century historicism, but two core aspects could be singled out. The first is the belief in the fundamental historicity of man and culture, the idea that the essence of social and cultural phenomena lies in their history. This is the ontological dimension of historicism, which involves its fundamental assumptions about the nature of the historical process and the kind of things that matter in historical reality. The second central aspect of historicism is the conviction that the study of history should be an empirical discipline, or a *Wissenschaft* – the English term 'science' is not quite applicable here, as it has a much stronger association with the natural sciences than its German equivalent. This is the methodological core of historicism, which was elaborated in a distinctive approach to historical research centred on the ideal of objectivity and the critical analysis of sources. It should be noted, though, that method and ontology are not two strictly separated domains. On the one hand,

ideas on historical method have an effect on the ontological construction of ob-
jects in the past. On the other hand, assumptions about the fundamental building
blocks of historical reality impinge on views about the methods that should be
employed in studying the past.

Research on historicism has been done from a wide variety of approaches,
resulting in a broad spectre of interpretations. One of the earliest examinations
of the basic ideas determining the character of historicism was undertaken by
Friedrich Meinecke in the 1930s, partly in reaction to the discussions on the crisis
of historicism in the previous decades.[4] Meinecke's analysis of historicism has
two interconnected dimensions: he regards it as a specific mode of historical con-
sciousness, and he points out that it is based on certain ontological assumptions
concerning the entities that determine the course of history. According to Mei-
necke, the emergence of historicism is one of the defining moments in Western
intellectual history, since it involves a new kind of historical consciousness in
which man, society and culture no longer have timeless essences, but should be
understood in terms of their historical development. A similar view is brought
forward by Karl Mannheim, who also claims that the acknowledgement of the
fundamental historicity of human affairs is the core of the historicist *Weltanschau-
ung*.[5] Meinecke furthermore argues that historicism involves the adoption of an
individualizing instead of a generalizing perspective. This is connected with the
ontological notion that the historical process is shaped by individualities. These
individualities can be persons, but also higher-order phenomena such as states,
which are regarded as individual entities governed by unique principles.[6]

In more recent studies other aspects of nineteenth-century historicism have
come to occupy a central place. A very influential point of view is Jörn Rüsen's
analysis of historicism as a scientific practice that developed within a specific dis-
ciplinary matrix – or a paradigm, in Kuhnian terms. The fact that Rüsen focuses
on the development of historicism as an academic discipline does not mean, how-
ever, that he is only interested in its research programmes and methodologies.
The institutional and political context in which historicism emerged and devel-
oped is just as important in Rüsen's work and in that of the scholars who share
his orientation.[7] A different interpretation is suggested by Wolfgang Hardtwig,
who criticizes the tendency in the work of Rüsen and others to make a strict
distinction between epistemology and historical ontology in the analysis of nine-
teenth-century historicism. By characterizing historicism as a *Geschichtsreligion*
Hardtwig tries to bring these two dimensions together. In the work of historicists
such as Humboldt and Ranke 'ideas' are the metaphysical heart of the historical
process, where God's plan with the world becomes visible. At the same time, they
are objects of knowledge, which give rise to a specific epistemology.[8] Daniel Fulda
emphasizes the aesthetic dimension of historicism. In his book on the rise of

historicism he argues that the scientific historiography of the nineteenth century had its roots in the poetical theories of the late eighteenth century. What matters most, in his opinion, are the literary means by which historians create an image of the past.[9] In a recent article Fulda modifies his position by describing historicism as a 'cultural pattern', a combination of interpretative schemes and practices that acquires durability through habituation. According to Fulda, the core of the cultural pattern of historicism is 'historicization'. This term denotes the meaningful integration of individual entities, such as periods of time, actors or beliefs, into a greater whole, such as history, society or culture. By looking at historicization as a cultural practice Fulda extends its scope beyond the narrow boundaries of academic historiography.[10] This is not unlike Mannheim's notion of historicism as a worldview that is of fundamental importance in modern culture as a whole, and not just in the limited setting of academic historiography. This wider proliferation of historicism has been examined in a range of recent studies, dealing with various aspects of nineteenth-century culture.[11]

A frequently made observation in the literature on historicism is that it does not emerge in the early nineteenth century as a completely new phenomenon, but that it is rooted in previous strands of historical thought and historical writing. Meinecke, for instance, extensively discusses the antecedents of historicism in eighteenth-century philosophy, and Rüsen emphasizes that important aspects of historicism can already be observed in German academic historiography in the second half of the eighteenth century.[12] In this essay I shall argue that many central features of nineteenth-century historicism should indeed be seen as the product of earlier developments, but that the roots of historicism can be traced back further than the eighteenth century.[13] Key aspects of the historicist conception of method developed out of humanist philology and its resonances in the early modern *ars historica* tradition. Furthermore, the philological perspective on sources involved a basic mode of historical consciousness, which was deepened in the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns of the late seventeenth century and in the Enlightenment, and was eventually transformed into a more radical kind of historicization in the later eighteenth century.

In the first volume of *The Making of the Humanities* I discussed how in the Italian Renaissance Machiavelli and Guicciardini turned the past into an object of study.[14] The starting point for this essay was Frank Ankersmit's discussion of modern historical consciousness in his book *Sublime Historical Experience*. Ankersmit argues that the dramatic events that took place in Italy in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries were catalysts for the emergence of a new kind of relation to the past. Due to the wars starting with the invasion of Italy by the French in 1494 and the sack of Rome by the German emperor Charles V in 1527 authors such as Machiavelli and Guicciardini had the traumatic experience

that the old world of the Italian city-states in which they had played important roles was irretrievably lost. This is what Ankersmit calls a 'sublime dissociation of the past'. A gap between past and present comes into being, and as a result the past becomes a potential object of study. According to Ankersmit, the French Revolution caused a similar sense of loss and rupture among historians in the years around 1800 as the events in Italy did 300 years earlier.[15] In the present essay I intend to connect the emergence of historicism in the early nineteenth century with the historical revolution of Machiavelli and Guicciardini in two ways. In the first place, by showing that there are certain continuities in the field of historical method and historical thought between 1500 and 1800. In the second place, by examining whether the emergence of historicism can be meaningfully linked to Ankersmit's claim about the radical modification of historical consciousness after the French Revolution. This would mean that, despite the continuities with the previous centuries, there is also something radically new in historicism, akin to the surfacing of a new way of relating to the past in the work of Machiavelli and Guicciardini.

Historiography from humanism to historicism

The humanist historiography of the Renaissance was strongly oriented towards rhetoric. This involved in the first place an emphasis on stylistic matters and things such as the use of fictive speeches in the representation of the past. The historical writing of the humanists was also rhetorical in a different sense, drawing on the practical dimension of rhetoric as a way of dealing with ethical and political ambivalences. Seen from this perspective, past and present were a continuous space filled with immediately relevant practical problems and moral examples. The tragic historical consciousness of Machiavelli and Guicciardini broke up this continuous space; they came to see the past as an object of study that differs from the present in important ways. In their view of history human agency played a central role, causing the historical process to take dramatic turns, such as the developments they observed in Italy in their own days. This did not involve, however, a radical historicization of the world as would emerge in the years around 1800. For Machiavelli and Guicciardini, the past differs from the present, but not to the extent that it becomes so fundamentally foreign that it can only be understood in its own terms. As a consequence, they did not experience the problem of historical interpretation as intensely as nineteenth-century historians. What we do observe, however, is a certain methodological consciousness, although mainly in Guicciardini's work and far less in Machiavelli's writings.[16]

A more explicit kind of reflection on historical method comes up in the second half of the sixteenth century, when the genre of the *ars historica* rapidly gains a considerable popularity, first in Italy, but almost immediately also in other European countries. There were no classical models of treatises dealing with the rules for writing history apart from a letter by Lucian, but fragmentary observations on this theme by classical authors could also serve as a starting point for the theoretical discussions in the *artes historicae* of the Renaissance. Especially influential were Cicero's remarks that history is to be valued as *magistra vitae* and that the primary task of historians is to tell the truth and to be impartial. Cicero discussed historiography in the framework of rhetorical theory, and this perspective also dominated the early modern *artes historicae*. This meant that history was primarily seen as an instrument of moral and political education, and that narrative structure and style were central themes in the discussion of how history should be written. It could be argued that the pre-eminence of this rhetorical approach to historiography involves a return to the humanist tradition that Machiavelli and Guicciardini had began to dismantle. Yet, in many *artes historicae* – though perhaps more in later treatises written in northern Europe than in sixteenth-century Italian texts – we also find theoretical considerations of a different kind, focusing on the critical methods necessary to arrive at a true description of the past.[17]

On the one hand, these methods were embedded in the rhetorical perspective on history. They were the instruments of historical *inventio*, the ways of gathering material that would enable the historian to comply with the Ciceronian demand to give a true account of the past.[18] Another source of inspiration for the development of critical historical methods was humanist philology, which brought about a new sense of historicity ensuing from the linguistic analysis of ancient texts. Lorenzo Valla was an important figure in this development. In 1440 Valla had shown that the *Donatio Constantini* was a forgery by pointing out that the language and the style of this text precluded its being written in the fourth century. Establishing the authenticity of ancient texts and reconstructing their original versions were the central concerns of humanist philology. This involved a view of texts and language that was fundamentally historical, in the sense that texts were seen as the products of specific periods, characterized by specific modes of writing. Seen from a philological perspective, the past was not primarily an unproblematic source of moral and political examples, as in the rhetorical tradition, but rather a terrain that differed from the present in important ways and that could only be accessed through meticulous critical work. Thus, the deployment of philological methods gave rise to a more historical view of the world involving an awareness of the context dependency of human thoughts and actions.[19]

The influence of the philological approach on the genre of the *ars historica* is very clearly visible in the writings of the French scholars François Baudouin (1520-1573) and Jean Bodin (1530-1596). Both were trained as lawyers, and characteristic of their *artes historicae* is that the study of history is discussed in conjunction with the study of the law, which they regarded as a historically variable phenomenon. In his *Institutio historiae universae* (1561) Baudouin dutifully repeats the Ciceronian stock phrases of the rhetorical theory of history, but in reality he is interested in other matters. A central concern of his treatise is the methodology of historical investigation, explored in extensive discussions of the ways in which historians are to handle their sources. Eyewitness accounts and accounts by later historians are assessed, and in an explicit comparison of the value of primary and secondary sources Baudouin argues that historians should always turn to the former.[20] Jean Bodin's *Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem* (1566) is probably the best known treatise in the *ars historica* tradition, in the sixteenth century as well as in the modern period. Bodin attempts to turn the philological criticism of sources, elaborated by Baudouin and others, into a more or less formalized historical methodology, resembling the efforts of Petrus Ramus to build a structured framework for the organization of knowledge. In Bodin's *Methodus* the emphasis on the writing of historical treatises of the early *artes historicae* is replaced by a focus on reading and critically assessing historical material. His theoretical ambitions are higher than those of his predecessors, which is visible in, for instance, his efforts to relate the historical development of a people to its national character – in Bodin's opinion mainly determined by geographical factors, but also susceptible to the effects of cultural habituation.[21]

In his *Discours de la méthode* Descartes expresses strong doubts about the value of historical knowledge. He argues that people who are too much involved with history tend to know next to nothing of the present. Furthermore, even the best historical works are necessarily perspectival. As a consequence, Descartes considers the traditional view that the study of the past is a source of examples for the present to be untenable.[22] This kind of scepticism about historical knowledge was an important challenge for historical theorists, who tried to meet this challenge by looking at historical writing in terms of the methods needed to arrive at reliable knowledge of the past.[23] This happened in the genre of the *ars historica*, but a more significant turn towards methodical research can be found in the fields that would later be called the auxiliary sciences of history – chronology, diplomatics, palaeography, genealogy and other disciplines. Important contributions to chronology were already made around 1600 by Joseph Scaliger, who used philological methods to question received views about the dating of events in ancient and biblical history.[24] A landmark in the development of historical methods at the end of the seventeenth century was the publication of *De re diplomatica* in 1681 by the

French Benedictine monk Jean Mabillon. This book, which continued to be used by historians until the nineteenth century, provided an overview of the ways of examining the origin and authenticity of medieval manuscripts, extracting clues from things such as the material on which the document in question was written, the type of handwriting and the linguistic characteristics of the text.[25]

Mabillon's work on medieval documents coincided with a rise of interest in medieval matters in France, connected with the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns. In this dispute a new perspective on the past emerged that broke away from the humanist assumption that classical models could be unproblematically imitated in later periods. The position of the Moderns involved the idea that the literary and artistic norms of the ancient world were not necessarily applicable in the cultural context of the present. The present, in other words, is fundamentally different from the past. Here, we already find the traces of one of the core notions of the Enlightenment: the view that the historical process was characterized by progress, culminating in the rational outlook of the modern age.[26] Medievalism is not something that we would normally associate with the position of the Moderns in the Quarrel or with the Enlightenment, but in fact it is based on the same reorientation towards history. The humanists of the Renaissance regarded the Middle Ages as culturally inferior in comparison with both classical antiquity and their own age. In the late seventeenth century, however, some authors began to defend the view that the Middle Ages should be regarded as a historical period in its own right, with cultural standards that could not simply be discarded in the light of classical norms. As a consequence, in the eighteenth century the Middle Ages became an object of intensive research, informed by the view of the Moderns that the literary and artistic models of classical antiquity were products of a specific time and therefore not universally applicable.[27]

The notions of progress and modernity played a crucial role in the historiography of the Enlightenment, especially in its French and Scottish versions. Authors such as Voltaire, Turgot and Ferguson described the historical process as a continuous increase of rationality and knowledge, culminating in the Enlightened culture of their own days. The mode of historical consciousness lying behind this historiographical approach has its roots in the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, and assumes that various periods in history have their own character, but can nevertheless be critically assessed from the advanced perspective of the present. Not unlike the historical writing of the Renaissance, Enlightenment historiography primarily has a pragmatic and didactic aim. It could be characterized as 'philosophical history', which means that historical writing is primarily seen as a critical analysis of society and culture. In comparison with earlier forms of historical writing the scope of Enlightenment historiography is significantly broader: it is not limited to political or religious history, but also covers areas

such as customs, social relations and modes of production – fields that we would
nowadays regard as the objects of social and cultural history. Another important
aspect of Enlightenment historiography is its emphasis on wide-ranging causal
explanations and general patterns. Furthermore, it intends to be universal, in
the sense that it expands the spatio-temporal horizon of historiography beyond
the boundaries of biblical chronology and the world of Europe and the Mediter-
ranean.[28] By engaging history in this particular way the Enlightenment inau-
gurated a new conception of time, or a new 'regime of historicity', in which the
past could no longer serve as a source of examples for the present but came to
be seen in the light of the privileged condition of the present and the even more
magnificent future.[29]

It is sometimes argued that the historians of the Enlightenment were only
interested in theoretical and philosophical generalizations and neglected the me-
thodical examination of sources. When we take a closer look at the historical
works produced in the Enlightenment, this view seems to be rather biased, pos-
sibly as an effect of the negative stance towards Enlightenment historiography
that was part of the self-definition of nineteenth-century historicism. The critical
analysis of sources is a crucial element in the work of most Enlightenment histori-
ans. Especially in Germany, the Enlightened perspective on the past was strongly
entangled with the tradition of historical research that had developed on the basis
of philological methods in the previous centuries. In contrast with the situation
in other European countries, where historians tended to be private scholars, in
Germany historiography was primarily practised at the universities. In the course
of the eighteenth century, the University of Göttingen, founded in the 1730s, be-
came the centre of a highly developed historiographical practice that combined
the new sense of historicity of the Enlightenment with a thorough methodologi-
cal orientation. A key figure in the Göttingen school was Johann Christoph Gat-
terer, professor of history in the second half of the eighteenth century. Gatterer
systematically instructed his students in the methods of historical research, and
made important contributions to the development of the auxiliary disciplines of
history, such as diplomatics and genealogy. We also find a certain hermeneutical
consciousness in his work, visible in the way he tried to take account of the point
of view of the historian in his theorizing about historical research and histori-
cal writing. At the same time, he shared the Enlightened preference for a broad
cultural history in which causal explanations played a central role. Gatterer also
played an important role in the institutionalization of academic historiography,
by initiating the publication of historical journals and by establishing a historical
institute at the University of Göttingen.[30]

Historicism, individuality and the modern regime of historicity

It could be argued that in late eighteenth-century Göttingen history was already established as an academic discipline. It was institutionalized in an academic school, in chairs and in journals, and it had a clear set of empirical methods, developed in the course of three centuries. Therefore, the view that history only became a discipline with the emergence of historicism in the early nineteenth century does not seem to be justified, although it could be argued that the development of institutions and methods in the field of history greatly accelerated after 1800. The academic and cultural prominence of history in the nineteenth century was significantly greater than in the centuries before, but a renewal in the field of methods and institutions does not seem to be the crucial explanatory factor in this matter. A broader cultural modification and intensification of historical consciousness, connected with the rise of the nation state, is more likely to be the cause of this increase in the status of historiography.[31]

In the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns the view emerged that each period in history has its own specific character. This view shaped the perspective on the past of the Enlightenment, but not to the extent that it was deemed impossible to express normative judgements about earlier periods in history. A deepened historical consciousness that also embraces a sense of moral relativity can be found in the work of Johann Gottfried Herder, who is often seen as an important philosophical precursor of historicism.[32] In *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (1774) Herder polemically rejects the idea that history is a trajectory of progress to be measured against a universal standard of rationality. In his opinion, each historical period can only be judged in its own terms. The central entities in Herder's view of history are nations, which have their own organic principles of development that cannot be subsumed under a global pattern, as was claimed by the leading historians of the Enlightenment.[33] It should be noted, though, that these historicist elements in Herder's thought are balanced by more Enlightened views, such as an emphasis on a universal humanity and a cosmopolitan orientation.[34]

Frank Ankersmit argues that the Renaissance and the French Revolution were the two crucial moments in the development of historical consciousness in Europe. In the Renaissance Machiavelli and Guicciardini experienced a tragic sense of loss due to the dramatic events in Italy in their days, which made them see the past as an object of research dissociated from the present. Without exception nineteenth-century historians regarded the French Revolution as a major rupture in the course of history. Ranke, for instance, speaks of the Revolution as the 'weltbeherrschende Ereignis unsers Jahrhunderts', inaugurating a modern period that is totally different from the past.[35] The political impact that the French Revolu-

tion had on Germany is usually regarded as an important factor in the emergence of historicism. Iggers argues that the events between 1789 and 1815 shattered the Enlightened belief in universal values and transformed the cultural and cosmopolitan nationalism of the late eighteenth century into a political nationalism that had the state as its focal point.[36] To the German historians of the nineteenth century the world of the *ancien régime* was irreversibly lost, though without the tragic sense of personal culpability felt by Machiavelli and Guicciardini.

Historicism can be seen as a way of making sense of this loss by choosing a new way to turn the past into an object of research. This does not mean that older ideas about historicity and historical method were totally abandoned. In fact, the innovative character of historicism is not primarily situated in these domains, but in the realm of historical ontology. At the core of the historicist perspective on the past was a dual notion of individuality that made it possible to think of history as on the one hand a process shaped by intentional actions of individual people and on the other hand a coherent whole structured by the development of higher-order individualities, which nineteenth-century historicists almost exclusively identified with nation states. This dual notion of individuality was closely connected with what François Hartog calls the 'modern regime of historicity'. In this new perspective on historical time the present and the future became the point of orientation from which the past was to be understood. This means that the past was no longer seen as a source of examples for the present; instead, past events acquired a meaning by connecting them with the present situation and possible future stages of development of the historical process. To a certain extent, the modern regime of historicity already started to emerge in the Enlightenment. Historicism gave a different shape to the modern regime of historicity by postulating individual entities in the historical process that were conceived as developing from an origin to an inherent *telos*.[37] Usually, this involved studying the history of a nation state in the light of a conception of its full development. This historical ontology made it possible to overcome the experience of rupture brought about by the French Revolution without recurring to things as the universal notion of rationality of the Enlightenment or Hegel's overarching historical teleology – what mattered was the continuity between origin and *telos* of the individualities in the historical process. Concurrently, historical time became populated with objects of an inherently historical nature that could be turned into objects of historical research.

Wilhelm von Humboldt was not a practising historian, but he was nevertheless one of the main theorists of historicism in the early nineteenth century. Two short texts by Humboldt, 'Betrachtungen über die Weltgeschichte' (1814) and 'Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtsschreibers' (1821), contain an early and influential formulation of the dual notion of individuality characteristic of historicism.

Humboldt rejects Hegel's teleological philosophy of history, because it eventually reduces the richness of individual phenomena to the abstract end of the historical process. This does not mean, however, that he does not see any coherence in history, but this coherence is not a matter of rational teleology, but of organic development. In their study of the past historians should focus on individual people and individual nations. In Humboldt's opinion, each person and each nation has a unique organic principle of development, but people and nations are also organically connected, like leaves are connected to trees. These organic connections constrict historical developments and explain their coherence, but just as in nature the interplay of forces can result in unexpected novelties.[38]

According to Humboldt, individualities such as persons and nations should be understood as manifestations of ideas. He distinguishes three layers in the historical process: first of all there are events, these events are caused by physical and psychological forces, and these forces get their direction from certain ideas that are not immediately visible. These ideas are the immaterial and timeless factors behind the dynamics of history and manifest themselves primarily in individualities such as persons and nations. Historians should in the first place describe what happened in the past on the basis of critical and methodical research. Humboldt argues, however, that a mere description of events is not all that there is to historical writing. In addition, historians should try to understand the ideas behind the historical process that shape its course. For the understanding of ideas Humboldt uses the term *ahnden*, which indicates that ideas are to be grasped intuitively rather than analyzed rationally.[39] Humboldt remarks that in this respect the activity of the historian bears some resemblance to that of the poet, but more important is that with his notion of *ahnden* he proposes a method of historical interpretation that anticipates the more elaborated methodologies of authors such as Johann Gustav Droysen.[40]

In the preface to his first major work, *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker* (1824), Leopold von Ranke argues that it is the task of the historian to show 'wie es eigentlich gewesen'.[41] With this statement Ranke rejects both the explicitly moralizing style of the Enlightenment and the abstract speculation of Hegelian philosophy of history. It does not imply, as is often claimed, that Ranke proposes a kind of historiography that merely consists of empirical descriptions of past states of affairs. With the word *eigentlich* Ranke also points to the essence of the past, and not just to the reality of observable facts.[42] Particular events play an important role in Ranke's historical work, but describing them is not a goal in itself. In a debate with the Hegelian historian Heinrich Leo on the *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker* he defends his emphasis on particular events as a more effective route to discover essential truths about the past than speculative philosophy.[43]

Just as Humboldt, Ranke understands the essence of the past in terms of a dual notion of individuality, although in a way that is more implicit and more open to various interpretations. According to Ranke the historical process is shaped by different kinds of individualities, persons and states in particular. These individualities should be regarded as embodiments of ideas. It is not quite clear, though, how Ranke conceives the relation between individualities of different levels. Meinecke argues that states, conceived as higher-order individualities, are the primary entities in Ranke's historical ontology. This means that the actions of individual people are eventually shaped by the inner principles governing the development of the state to which they belong.[44] Yet, at various places in his work Ranke also describes cases in which free choices by individual persons are decisive factors in the course of the historical process, without relating these choices to the ideas embodied in individualities of a higher order.[45]

Ranke's writings contain many paradoxes, but it could be the case that it is exactly the paradoxical nature of his work that explains its appeal to its nineteenth-century audience as an exemplary way of dealing with historical reality. Ranke claimed that his approach to the past was radically new, but, as Anthony Grafton has shown, the source criticism that he regards as a fundamental innovation is actually indebted to a much older philological tradition. What was without precedent, though, was Ranke's ability 'to bring the flavour and the texture of the documents into his own text'.[46] Ranke claims to be objective, but it is not obvious what he means by that.[47] Impartiality is definitely part of Ranke's notion of objectivity, but it should be noted that Cicero already regarded impartiality as one of the key virtues of the historian. On the one hand, Ranke's notion of objectivity seems to imply a strictly empirical orientation towards sources and particular events, but on the other hand, there is undeniably a strong metaphysical dimension in his work. In the end, Ranke believes that the course of history is determined by God, but this belief evokes new tensions, for instance between necessity and freedom and between universality and particularity.[48] Ranke's dual notion of individuality is his way of addressing these tensions. This ontological assumption enables him to turn the past into an object of historical research.

Johann Gustav Droysen is the principal methodologist of nineteenth-century historicism. Partly in reaction to the rise of positivism in historical studies he develops an elaborate theory of historical interpretation. Droysen strongly opposes the positivist ideal of lawlike explanation; instead, he describes the task of historiography as 'forschend zu verstehen'.[49] According to Droysen, historical research consists of *Heuristik* and *Kritik* – the methods of finding sources and of critically assessing their value. His views on these matters do not entail a total departure from the philologically oriented tradition that also informs the work of other nineteenth-century historicists. Droysen's views of interpretation, however,

can be seen as a major advance in historical methodology. Where earlier authors spoke of an intuitive process of *ahnden*, Droysen develops a systematic model of the various operations involved in historical interpretation. Droysen calls the first of these operations pragmatic interpretation, by which he means the reconstruction of past events on the basis of the sources available to the historian. The interpretation of conditions establishes a connection between events and the circumstances in which they took place, such as the geographical setting or the mentality of a certain period. Psychological interpretation uncovers the intentions of the individual historical actors who initiate a particular course of events. The fourth modality of interpretation is the interpretation of the ideas behind the *sittliche Mächte* playing a role in the historical process. With the term *sittliche Mächte* Droysen refers to things that we would now call institutions, such as the family, the state and the law. Each of these *sittliche Mächte* is the expression of an idea that determines the collective action of a group of individuals.[50]

Droysen's methodology of historical research evidently depends on the dual notion of individuality characteristic of historicism, but it also reinforces this notion and makes it more precise. Here we see, perhaps much more clearly than in the work of Humboldt and Ranke, how ontology and methodology are mutually interdependent. What the past is like and how it should be studied are questions that in the end cannot be answered separately. Droysen's systematic outline of the process of historical interpretation seems to suggest that it would be possible to eliminate the metaphysical dimension from historical research. Nevertheless, Droysen holds the view that knowledge of the historical process is only meaningful in relation to a comprehension of God's intentions with the world. Just as in the case of Ranke and other historicists, Droysen's metaphysics has an important religious component.[51] Yet, we might abstract from this aspect of nineteenth-century historicism, and still maintain that ontology and method are two dimensions of a research practice that cannot be separated. As I have tried to show in this essay, working in an academic discipline does not only involve devising a set of methods, but also creating an object.

Conclusion

Nineteenth-century historicism is a complicated phenomenon that has been approached from a multitude of angles. In this essay I have analyzed historicism as a complex of ideas about historical ontology and historical method fed by a specific kind of historical experience. In the work of Machiavelli and Guicciardini the tragic sense of loss caused by the dramatic events occurring in Italy around 1500 is clearly visible. In the writings of the historicists of the early nineteenth century we do not

directly observe a similar dissociation of the past in the wake of the no less dramatic events of the French Revolution. Ankersmit's thesis about the role of such dissociations in the development of historical consciousness seems to be more compelling in the case of Renaissance Italy than in the case of the French Revolution.

Yet, the French Revolution does play a role in the emergence of historicism, although in a more hidden and less personally relevant way. In fact, nineteenth-century historicism could be interpreted as an effort to overcome the gap in the historical process caused by the Revolution by positing individualities that develop towards an inherent *telos*. As a consequence, the past got populated with all kinds of individualities satiated with reality that could become the object of historical research. Often, historicism is seen as the breeding ground of historical methodology. Yet, as we have seen, most research methods used by nineteenth-century historicists already existed in the context of early modern philology and historical theory. The truly innovative aspect of historicism is its ontology. Its dual notion of individuality entailed a conception of historical reality that made it possible to see both the coherence of the historical process and the irreducible uniqueness of particular events. Michel Foucault developed a related argument in *Les mots et les choses*, although in more general terms and saying almost nothing about the field of historiography. At the heart of Foucault's analysis is the claim that in the years around 1800 a substantial ontological shift took place, resulting in a perception of the world as fundamentally historical.[52]

Historicism rapidly acquired a dominant position in nineteenth-century academic historiography, and deeply influenced the other disciplines of the humanities as well. In fact, it could be argued that the entire domain of the humanities in the nineteenth century largely adopted a historicist approach. This involved a rearrangement of earlier hierarchical relations between the various disciplines of the humanities. As we have seen, in the early modern period history turned to philology in order to define its methods. In the nineteenth century, however, other disciplines turned to history, and the use of historical methods became a defining trait of the humanities as a whole. Behind this development lay a fundamental ontological reorientation. The world was not merely examined from a historical perspective, reality had become a space populated by individualities with an essentially historical character.

Notes

1   Karl R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957).
2   Otto Gerhard Oexle, 'Die Geschichtswissenschaft im Zeichen des Historismus: Bemerkungen zum Standort der Geschichtsforschung,' *Historische Zeitschrift* 238 (1984),

17-55; Georg G. Iggers, 'Historicism: The History and Meaning of the Term,' *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56 (1995), 129-152.

3   Ernst Troeltsch, 'Die Krisis des Historismus,' *Die neue Rundschau* 33 (1922), 572-590; idem, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1922). For modern discussions of the crisis of historicism, see Annette Wittkau, *Historismus: zur Geschichte des Begriffs und des Problems* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992) and Charles R. Bambach, *Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995).

4   Friedrich Meinecke, *Werke*, vol. 3: *Die Entstehung des Historismus* (1936; repr. Munich: Oldenbourg, 1959).

5   Karl Mannheim, 'Historismus,' *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 52 (1924), 1-60.

6   For the notion of individuality in historicism, see Jacques Bos, 'Individuality and Interpretation in Nineteenth-Century German Historicism,' in: Uljana Feest (ed.), *Historical perspectives on Erklären and Verstehen* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), 207-220.

7   Jörn Rüsen, *Konfigurationen des Historismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993). See also Horst Walter Blanke, *Historiographiegeschichte als Historik* (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1991) and Friedrich Jaeger and Jörn Rüsen, *Geschichte des Historismus: eine Einführung* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1992).

8   Wolfgang Hardtwig, 'Geschichtsreligion – Wissenschaft als Arbeit – Objektivität: der Historismus in neuer Sicht,' *Historische Zeitschrift* 252 (1991), 1-32.

9   Daniel Fulda, *Wissenschaft aus Kunst: die Entstehung der modernen deutschen Geschichtsschreibung, 1760-1860* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996).

10   Daniel Fulda, 'Historicism as a Cultural Pattern: Practising a Mode of Thought,' *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 4 (2010), 138-153.

11   See especially John Edward Toews, *Becoming Historical: Cultural Reformation and Public Memory in Early Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

12   Meinecke, *Entstehung des Historismus*; Rüsen, *Konfigurationen des Historismus*.

13   Cf. Ulrich Muhlack, *Geschichtswissenschaft im Humanismus und in der Aufklärung: die Vorgeschichte des Historismus* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1991).

14   Jacques Bos, 'Renaissance Historiography: Framing a New Mode of Historical Experience,' in: Rens Bod, Jaap Maat and Thijs Weststeijn (eds.), *The Making of the Humanities, Vol. 1: Early Modern Europe* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 351-365.

15   F.R. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 326-328, 356-363.

16   Bos, 'Renaissance Historiography'.

17   For the genre of the *ars historica* and Renaissance historical theory, see George H. Nadel, 'Philosophy of History before Historicism,' *History and Theory* 3 (1964), 291-315; Rüdiger Landfester, *Historia magistra vitae: Untersuchungen zur humanistischen Geschichtstheorie des 14. bis. 16. Jahrhunderts* (Geneva: Droz, 1972); Astrid Witschi-Bernz, 'Main Trends in Historical-Methods Literature: Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries,' *History and Theory*, Supplement 12 (1972), 51-90; Eckhard Kessler, 'Das rhetorische Modell der Historiographie,' in: Reinhart Koselleck, Heinrich Lütz and Jörn Rüsen (eds.), *Formen der Geschichtsschreibung* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1982), 37-85; Anthony Grafton, *What Was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

18   Landfester, *Historia magistra vitae*, 89-91.

19 On the importance of philology, and Valla in particular, for historical scholarship, see Donald R. Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship: Language. Law, and History in the French Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 19-50.

20 Ibid., 116-136; Grafton, *What Was History?*, 62-122.

21 Julian Franklin, *Jean Bodin and the Sixteenth-Century Revolution in the Methodology of Law and History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963); Marie-Dominique Couzinet, *Histoire et méthode à la Renaissance: une lecture de la Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem de Jean Bodin* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1996).

22 René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, 5th ed. (Paris: J. Vrin, 1976), 6-7.

23 Anhony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 206-207.

24 Anthony Grafton, 'Joseph Scaliger and Historical Chronology: The Rise and Fall of a Discipline,' *History and Theory* 14 (1975), 156-185.

25 Paul McDonald, 'Mabillon and the Birth of Diplomatics,' *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 8 (1979), 441-448.

26 Allan Megill, 'Aesthetic Theory and Historical Consciousness in the Eighteenth Century,' *History and Theory* 17 (1978), 29-62. See also Joseph M. Levine, *The Battle of the Books: History and Literature in the Augustan Age* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991) and Larry F. Norman, *The Shock of the Ancient: Literature and History in Early Modern France* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

27 Lionel Gossman, *Medievalism and the Ideologies of Enlightenment: The World and Work of La Curne de Sainte-Palaye* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1968); Alicia Montoya, 'Medievalism and Enlightenment, 1647-1750: Jean Chapelain to Jean-Jacques Rousseau,' *The Romanic Review* 100 (2009), 494-512.

28 Siep Stuurman, 'Tijd en ruimte in de Verlichting: de uitvinding van de filosofische geschiedenis,' in: Maria Grever and Harry Jansen (eds.), *De ongrijpbare tijd: temporaliteit en de constructie van het verleden* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2001), 79-96.

29 Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 69-74. For the notion 'regime of historicity', see François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité: présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris: Seuil, 2003).

30 Blanke, *Historiographiegeschichte als Historik*, 111-188; Konrad H. Jarausch, 'The Institutionalization of History in Eighteenth-Century Germany,' Ulrich Muhlack, 'Historie und Philologie,' Georg G. Iggers, 'The European Context of Eighteenth-Century German Enlightenment Historiography,' in: Hans Erich Bödeker et al. (eds.), *Aufklärung und Geschichte: Studien zur deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft im 18. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 25-48, 49-81, 225-245; Peter Hans Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

31 Cf. Toews, *Becoming Historical*.

32 Meinecke, *Entstehung des Historismus*, 355-444; Georg G. Iggers, *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft: eine Kritik der traditionellen Geschichtsauffassung von Herder bis zur Gegenwart*, rev. ed. (Vienna: Böhlau, 1997), 43-55.

33 Johann Gottfried Herder, *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit*, in: *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 5, ed. Bernhard Suphan (Berlin: Weimann, 1891), 475-594.

34 Wolfgang Förster, 'Johann Gottfried Herder: Weltgeschichte und Humanität,' in: Bödecke et al., *Aufklärung und Geschichte*, 363-387.

35 Leopold von Ranke, 'Vorlesungen über die französische Revolution und die Kriege Napoleons, 1855,' in: *Aus Werk und Nachlaß*, vol. 4: *Vorlesungseinleitungen*, ed. Volker Dotterweich and Walther Peter Fuchs (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1975), 239.

36   Iggers, *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft*, 57-61.

37   Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité*; Reinhart Koselleck, 'Historia magistra vitae: über die Auflösung des Topos im Horizont neuzeitlich bewegter Geschichte,' in: *Vergangene Zukunft: zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (1979; repr. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), 38-66; Chris Lorenz, 'Unstuck in Time, or: The Sudden Presence of the Past,' in: Karin Tilmans, Frank van Vree and Jay Winter (eds.), *Performing the Past: Memory, History, and Identity in Modern Europe* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 67-102.

38   Wilhelm von Humboldt, 'Betrachtungen über die Weltgeschichte,' in: *Werke*, vol. 1: *Schriften zur Anthropologie und Geschichte* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1960), 567-577.

39   Wilhelm von Humboldt, 'Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtsschreibers,' in: *Werke*, vol. 1: *Schriften zur Anthropologie und Geschichte* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1960), 585-606.

40   Viktor Lau, *Erzählen und Verstehen: historische Perspektiven der Hermeneutik* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1999), 346-347.

41   Leopold von Ranke, *Sämmtliche Werke*, vol. 33/34: *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker* (1824; repr. Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1874), vii.

42   Michael-Joachim Zemlin, *Geschichte zwischen Theorie und Theoria: Untersuchungen zur Geschichtsphilosophie Rankes* (PhD diss., University of Cologne, 1985), 275-346.

43   Siegfried Baur, *Versuch über die Historik des jungen Ranke* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1998), 112-123.

44   Meinecke, *Entstehung des Historismus*, 589-592.

45   Gerhard Frick, *Der handelnde Mensch in Rankes Geschichtsbild* (Zurich: Weiss, 1953), 75-79, 88-97.

46   Grafton, *The Footnote*, 56-57.

47   Rudolf Vierhaus, 'Rankes Begriff der historischen Objektivität,' in: Reinhart Koselleck, Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Jörn Rüsen (eds.), *Objektivität und Parteilichkeit in der Geschichtswissenschaft* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1977), 63-76; Thomas Nipperdey, 'Zum Problem der Objektivität bei Ranke,' in Wolfgang J. Mommsen (ed.), *Leopold von Ranke und die moderne Geschichtswissenschaft* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1988), 215-222.

48   Hardtwig, 'Geschichtsreligion,' 3-4; Leonard Krieger, 'Elements of Early Historicism: Experience, Theory, and History in Ranke,' *History and Theory*, Supplement 14 (1975), 1-14; idem, *Ranke: The Meaning of History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977). Ranke's American followers totally ignored the metaphysical aspect of his work. See Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

49   Johann Gustav Droysen, *Grundriß der Historik*, in: *Historik: Vorlesungen über Enzyklopädie und Methodologie der Geschichte*, ed. Rudolph Hübner (1858; repr. Munich: Oldenbourg, 1937), 325-326.

50   Ibid., 339-344.

51   Hardtwig, 'Geschichtsreligion,' 5-6; Dirk Fleischer, 'Geschichtserkenntnis als Gotteserkenntnis: das Theologische Fundament der Geschichtstheorie Johann Gustav Droysens,' in: Horst Walter Blanke (ed.), *Historie und Historik: 200 Jahre Johann Gustav Droysen* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2009), 73-89.

52   Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 314-398.