Ranke the reactionary

Peter Burke
IT IS NOT EASY to give a definition, or even an exact description, of Ranke's contribution to the discipline of history. Many past definitions characterize his achievement in such a way that they do injustice to important developments in European historical writing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For this reason it may be useful to creep up on Ranke from behind, in other words, to see him from the perspective of his predecessors rather than his successors. For example, Ranke is sometimes claimed to be the originator of the important historiographical turn from the narrative "chronicle" to the documentary "record." On the one side, his famous Zur Kritik neuer Geschichtschreiber is presented as the first serious criticism of narrative sources such as Giovio and Guicciardini. On the other, Ranke is described, as he was by Lord Acton in his inaugural lecture at Cambridge, as "the real originator of the heroic study of records;" and great emphasis is placed on his use, for example, of the archives of Venice (for the reports of ambassadors) and Frankfurt (for the proceedings of the Reichstag in the age of the Reformation). 1

However, Ranke was not the first historian to suspect the reliability of Guicciardini or Giovio; criticisms of these historians were already being put forward in the sixteenth century. His general critique of modern historians followed the model of the reflections on the unreliability of the ancient historians offered by classical scholars such as Wolf and Niebuhr. Even his formulation of the historian's task as describing "what actually happened" was a sixteenth-century topos. 2 As for the "heroic study of records," it should be taken back to the seventeenth century, if not before. 3 One might, for example, ask how there came to be a Venetian archive for Ranke to use; it was because the historical culture of seventeenth-century Venetian patricians already involved a concern with records. 4 A brief treatise on archives was published in Venice in 1632. 5

The main purpose of this paper, however, is not to discuss Ranke's relation to his sources, but to offer a few reflections on the intellectual cost of his achievement. This achievement is often described, on the model of Kant's, as a "Copernican Revolution," a metaphor worth studying (like others used by historians) in its own right. 6 In certain important respects, however, Ranke was not so much, historiographically speaking, a revolutionary as a "reac-


3. A good picture of concern with documents by French and German scholars from the late seventeenth century onward can be found in Historischer Forschung im 18. Jahrhundert, ed. K. Hammer and J. Voss (Bonn, 1976).

4. Gaetano Cozzi, Il doge Nicolò Cornerini (Venice and Rome: Fondazione Gini, 1938), chap. 5; and

5. Published by SURFACE, 1988
tionary,” in the literal sense that he was reacting against an earlier historical revolution: that of the eighteenth century. The intellectual price of his achievement was, unfortunately, to cut off this older “new history” in its prime, because it was not consistent with the new model or paradigm of history which he put forward and which was interpreted (rather more narrowly, perhaps, than Ranke ever intended) by his followers.7

Like scientific revolutions, historical revolutions are constantly being discovered these days, and our conceptual currency is in serious danger of debasement. Yet, a good case can be made for describing the changing practice of history in eighteenth-century Europe as revolutionary. I will try to make this case now, or at any rate, to summarize it.8

In this period, a number of historians in France, Britain, and elsewhere rebelled against the traditional dominance of political events. One of the most eloquent communicators of this rebellion was the Comte de Boulainvillers, who dismissed traditional history as “une succession de faits d’armes et de guerres peu intéressantes dans notre situation présente” (“a succession of military actions and wars, of little interest in our present situation”). Elsewhere he complained in his typically polemical style that

Nos auteurs ne nous parlent que des princes, ou de leurs favoris, de quelques événements, de batailles, de traités... Quel rapport des moeurs communes... avec de tels objets?... croyez-vous, Mademoiselle, que l’on soit bien avancé de savoir la date de quelques événements, le nom des princes, de leurs ministres, de leurs généraux et de leurs maîtresses, si l’on ignore d’ailleurs les ressorts de leurs actions, de leur gouvernement, si l’on ne s’instruit du génie de chaque siècle, des opinions, des moeurs, des idées dominantes, ou pour tout dire des passions qui conduisaient les hommes?9

Our authors tell us only about princes or their favorites, certain events, battles, and treaties... what is the relation between these objects and society?... do you believe, Mademoiselle, that we have made such progress by knowing the date of some events, the names of princes and their ministers, their generals and their mistresses, while otherwise remaining ignorant of the reasons for their actions and their policies, and unaware of the genius of each age, the opinions, the manners, the dominant ideas, or, to sum it all up, the passions which drive men? (my translation)

These complaints were quickly to become a commonplace, especially in France. Voltaire, with his usual gift for seizing on other people’s ideas and making them his own, provided a number of variations on this theme, all con brio. The celebrated orientalist Anquetil-Duperron provided a new version of the topos when he distinguished what he called the histoire des opinions from the unreliable histoire des événements.10 The parallel with the rejection of histoire événementielle at the beginning of the twentieth century by François Simiand, Lucien Febvre, and others will be obvious, and I shall return to it toward the end of this paper.11

The case for an eighteenth-century historical revolution depends, of course, on actions rather than words, on practice rather than theory, and in particular, on the broadening of the historian’s subject matter at this time to in-
10. Attention has been drawn to this passage in Momigliano, "Prelude to Mr. Gibbon."


12. The qualification "general" histories needs to be inserted because monographs had been concerned with some of these matters since the Renaissance. An obvious example is Giorgio Vasari's Lives (Florence, 1550-74), which sketches a history of art and provides biographies of artists.


16. Giannone, Storia civile del regno di Napoli (Naples: Nasso, 1723); Giambattista Vico, Scienza nuova (Naples: Mosca, 1725); L. A. Muratori, Antiquissima, 3 vols. (Milan, 1717-41); Giovanni Tiraboschi, Storia della letteratura italiana, 10 vols. in 13 (Modena: Società Tipografica, 1772-83); Marco Lastri, "Ricerche sull'antica e moderna popolazione di Firenze" (Florence: Cambi, 1753); Jacopo G. Galluzzi, Storia del granducato di Toscana sotto il governo della casa Medici, 3 vols. (Florence: Del Vigo, 1760).

tory of Civil Society (1767), Adam Smith’s Wealth of Nations (1776), and John Millar’s Origin of the Distinction of Ranks (1778). In England, Edward Gibbon’s chapters on the manners of pastoral nations are not the least remarkable part of his History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, while important contributions to cultural history were made by Charles Burney in his History of Music (1776–86) and by Thomas Warton in his unfinished History of English Poetry (1774–81), which reveals that the author, like his friend Richard Hurd (and like Sainte-Palaye), was interested in the history of chivalry. Two lesser-known works reveal the new concern with social history with particular clarity: Robert Henry’s The History of Great Britain (1771–93), and William Alexander’s The History of Women (1779).

In Germany, too, the new sociocultural, or “civil,” history was an important movement in the second half of the eighteenth century. The pioneers of this new history included Jacob Brucker, author of a remarkable Critical History of Philosophy; Joachim Winckelmann, with his justly famous history of ancient art; and Justus Möser, whose well-known history of Osnabrück, a local history inspired by Montesquieu, pointed German history in what its author called “a quite new direction” (eine ganz neue Wendung)—the direction of a more “useful and pragmatic” history which would include religion, property, law, manners, and the arts.20

Later in the century, the Göttingen school of historians approached the subject in a similarly broad way.21 This breadth can be seen in the universal histories of Gatterer and Schlozer and still more clearly in monographs on particular topics, such as local history (Spittler), the history of trade (Eichhorn), the history of diet (Schlozer), the history of literature (Eichhorn), and the history of women (Meiners), a study that asserts its independence from William Alexander, though published a few years after his work.22 As an illustration of this breadth of approach, the “total history” of the late eighteenth century, a famous passage from Schlozer may be worth quoting: “The discovery of spirits, the arrival of tobacco, sugar, coffee and tea in Europe have brought about revolutions just as great as, if not greater than, the defeat of the Invincible Armada, the Wars of the Spanish Succession, the Peace etc.”23

In the field of cultural history, the Göttingen school’s contribution included Eichhorn’s important Allgemeine Geschichte der Cultur, of which the first volume, dealing with the Middle Ages, appeared in 1795, the year of Ranke’s birth. Eichhorn’s discussion of chivalry owes a debt to the new British work (citing Hurd and Millar, for example). More of an innovation was his concern with the history of the arts and sciences, including their social history: for as the author put it, their development “cannot be separated from the history of the changing social situation.” Eichhorn described his study as a general introduction to the more specific and specialized histories of particular disciplines, “die specielle Geschichte der einzelnen Künste und Wissenschaften.”24 These specific histories were being written in his day at his university in a series described as the “History of the arts and sciences from their revival to the end of the eighteenth century, written by a society of learned men.” An obvious example is the four-volume History of Chemistry by Gmelin, which runs from the Arabs to Lavoisier. Gmelin’s preface pointed out the need to place the history of the sciences in a general cultural context, to study “both beneficial and harmful influences on the development

18. Millar’s work was first published in 1771 under the title Observations, with less stress on manners.
of the sciences, religion and irreligion, popular prejudices, external events and political relationships.\textsuperscript{25}

\section*{ALL THESE DEVELOPMENTS}
were cut off in their prime by the historical revolution associated with Ranke. In making this assertion I do not suggest that Ranke's own historical interests were confined to politics and to "events" in the narrow sense. I accept the arguments put forward by Vierhaus, Krieger, and others to the effect that Ranke was "more complicated than the symbol he became" and also that he was not uninterested in the history of society, art, literature, and even science, even if these concerns were relatively muted in his work.\textsuperscript{26}

However, whether intended or not, the movement Ranke led and the new historical paradigm he formulated and exemplified worked powerfully against the older "new history" of the eighteenth century. His approach to history was both more rigorous and more narrow than that of his predecessors. One is reminded of Thucydides, whose "strict standard of historical reliability... imposed the idea that contemporary political history was the only serious history; and Herodotus was cut off from the stream of ancient historiography... His tales, however attractive, looked oddly unprofessional."\textsuperscript{27}

Compared to archive-based political historians, those who worked on social and cultural history looked mere dilettanti, and what they produced was either impressionistic (in which case it was tarred with the brush of Voltairean superficiality) or statistical (in which case it could be criticized as reductionist). At a time when historians were aspiring to become professionals, social and cultural history was excluded from the discipline, as defined by the academics.\textsuperscript{28}

To be more precise, in Germany, and to a lesser extent elsewhere in Western Europe, social and cultural history was marginalized, treated with some disdain, and left largely to amateurs and popularizers, such as the politicians Guizot and Macaulay or the journalist Freytag (1859-67). Jacob Burckhardt was of course no amateur, but this rebel against Ranke was not taken too seriously by his fellow professionals until fairly late in his career. Economic historians (from the time of Schmoller) and art historians (from the time of Wolfflin) had their claims for professional status more or less accepted; but other kinds of social and cultural history had to face considerable opposition, as the Lamprecht-Streit in particular reveals. One does not need to be an uncritical partisan of Lamprecht (who was in some respects just the kind of leader that a movement for reform can do without) to notice the weak intellectual basis as well as the near-hysterical tone of his opponents. Despite the work of Max Weber (who identified himself as a historian rather than as a sociologist), the opposition to this second wave of the new history was so strong that its practitioners have had to wait—in Germany at least—until the late twentieth century for legitimation.\textsuperscript{29}

In France, where the historians associated with \textit{Annales} were accepted, indeed established, soon after (if not before) the end of the Second World War, the origins of their historical revolution are rarely traced back as far as the eighteenth century, despite Durkheim's interest in Montesquieu and Michelet's in Vico. Yet to read J. C. Gatterer's review of the state of French historiography in 1772, complete with statistical tables of articles published in different fields, is a curious sensation today. I find myself blinking and try-
TWO CENTURIES earlier! It would be a mistake to overemphasize the similarities between two movements for the renewal of historical studies, which took place in two very different cultural contexts, but the congruence between the two was such that the second movement could start more or less where the first one left off. It would also be a mistake to place the responsibility for the stifling or suppressing of the old "new history" on Ranke's shoulders alone. For a social or cultural historian it is a challenge to place this reaction in its social and cultural context, to account for the susceptibility of other historians to Ranke; in other words, to offer a social history of social history. However, I shall limit myself to a couple of suggestions.

At the microsocial level, the level of academic institutions, Ranke's dominance (direct or indirect) of the new university of Berlin was surely important, like the dominance of the Hautes Etudes by Fevre and Braudel a century later. This institutional framework deserves a detailed analysis, with particular attention to the conditions of the production of histories and the kind of work which was encouraged or (in the case of Lamprecht and his students) discouraged.

30. A model, not to say paradigm, of this kind of research is Pierre Bourdieu's *Homo academicus* (Paris: Minuit, 1984).


At the macrosocial level, there would seem to be an affinity between the history exemplified by Ranke and the world after 1789, when events took their revenge on those who, like the Comte de Boulainvillers, denied their importance. In his penetrating study of the relationship between perceptions of the future and perceptions of the past, Reinhart Koselleck suggested that 1789 marked a new "horizon of expectation" because the French Revolution "seemed to outstrip all previous experience" and undermined many of the generalizations put forward by eighteenth-century historians. There was an even closer affinity between Ranke's history and the world after 1815, when social history, like social reform, seemed dangerous, and political history was restored to a dominant position. There is a case for arguing that the movement which Ranke led was—in important respects, at least—not so much a "Copernican Revolution" in historiography as a counterrevolution.