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• INTRODUCTION •  
THE CONFUSING  
AND AMBIGUOUS LEGACY OF  
LEOPOLD VON RANKE

JAMES M. POWELL

**I**N OCTOBER 1986, on the centennial of Leopold von Ranke's death, Syracuse University joined with the American Historical Association, under the sponsorship of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung, to hold an international conference on "Leopold von Ranke and the Shaping of the Historical Discipline." The essays that follow, selected by the editors of the *Syracuse Scholar* from the papers delivered at the conference, provide an interesting introduction to the understanding of Ranke's role in modern historical studies. For Syracuse University, the conference provided an opportunity to showcase its possession of Ranke's personal library, acquired in 1887 as a nucleus for its historical collection and recently cataloged and entered on the OCLC computer network with support from the NEH and numerous German and American donors. These vast holdings of books, pamphlets, and manuscripts are a valuable resource for the study of European history from the later Middle Ages through the French Revolution.

The philosophical and methodological symmetry between the ideas of the great pioneers of the natural sciences and their creations forms one of the grand themes in the history of science. We need only think of the stamp of Darwin's theory of evolution on the biological sciences or, to go back in time, of Newton's laws of motion on physics. Outside the natural sciences, a figure like Adam Smith occupies a similar position. But other academic disciplines often cannot point to such clear relationships in their development. While they do not lack seminal thinkers, they owe more to a process of professionalization, which has brought together their disparate traditions in a common enterprise. The study and writing of history fall into this latter category. While no human society has been devoid of a sense of history, as myth, legend, or record keeping, and some have even made use of the past to explain the present, the notion of history as a critical inquiry has seen most of its growth only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the emergence of the academic discipline of history in the modern university. By its nature, this development has been a cooperative enterprise. But one figure, the German historian Leopold von Ranke, has loomed over all others not merely as a leader in the professionalization of historical studies, but as a thinker who con-

sciously tried to shape the future of the discipline. Though generally acknowledged as one of the greatest historians of all time, and even grouped by some with Herodotus, Thucydides, and Gibbon, his efforts were disputed in his own time and his legacy has continued to engender controversy.

Even before his death, critical appraisals of Ranke's work began to appear. Though his reputation declined somewhat during the latter years of his life, controversies about his contributions mounted during the last years of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, in part precipitated by the so-called Ranke-Renaissance in Germany, and in part by efforts elsewhere, but especially in the United States, to break out of the perceived limits of his approach to history. In the United States, as Dorothy Ross shows, Ranke had his greatest impact on a fledgling historical discipline and, though his thought was only partially assimilated, provoked a significant reaction that has yet to abate. To some degree out of favor in Germany during the National Socialist period, he became the subject of a number of important new studies in the fifties both in Germany and the United States. Most important were Rudolf Vierhaus's *Ranke und die soziale Welt* (1957), Hanno Helbling's *Leopold von Ranke und der historische Stil* (1953), and Theodore von Laue's *Leopold von Ranke: The Formative Years* (1950). Gunter Berg's *Leopold von Ranke als akademischer Lehrer* appeared in 1968, and in 1977, Leonard Krieger brought out his *Ranke: The Meaning of History*, judged by many to be the most important study to date. During this same period, Walther Peter Fuchs and his associates published several volumes of letters and lecture notes drawn chiefly from the Ranke manuscripts in Berlin.

**T**HE MAJOR CRITICISMS of Ranke, echoed in a number of the essays that follow, concentrate on the narrowness of his definition of history and his methodological conservatism. Although Ranke has been partially rescued from the charge that he viewed history simply as "past politics," Peter Burke makes the case that he cut off important developments in the earlier historical tradition by his insistence on the primacy of political history. He and others have pointed out that Ranke drew much of his methodology from earlier scholarship in philology and biblical criticism. Both Ernst Schulin and Felix Gilbert argue that Ranke's range, indeed his approach to history, was much broader than his critics have seen. On the basis of his reading of Ranke's lecture notes, Schulin presents a picture of Ranke's vision of politics that embraces issues often viewed in terms of culture and philosophy. Gilbert's study of the relationship between Ranke and the great Swiss historian of culture and art, Jacob Burckhardt, again suggests the complexity of his thought and his influence. In another essay Georg Iggers accuses the leaders of the Ranke-Renaissance of deliberately narrowing Ranke's views to make them fit better into their own exaltation of Bismarckian Germany. In particular, they de-emphasized both his European approach to history and his view of the fundamental role of religion in the understanding of the European past.

The question of Ranke's methodology is even more difficult. While it is relatively easy to locate the degree of his indebtedness to his predecessors and his philosophical bent—even though he misleadingly rejects Hegel in his writings—the positive side of his contribution only emerges from a careful

study of his writings. Aside from his brief *Zur Kritik neuer Geschichtschreiber*, to which many observers have turned for a rapid sighting of his views, he wrote no treatise on methodology. Instead, he scattered his ideas through writings that ranged over a period of sixty years. What emerges is far from coherent or systematic, although often important and even essential to an understanding of his contribution. In many ways, his greatest insight may have been his decision that history should be positioned between science and art, that it should form, as it were, a science in the language of the people.

The challenge that Ranke accepted was enormous. What is more significant is that he fully recognized the near impossibility of the task. Though committed to an ideal of historical objectivity, which he enshrined in his famous dictum—to present history “wie es eigentlich gewesen” (“as it actually happened”)—he envisioned historical truth always in future terms, the result of a continuing quest, to which his own contribution was transitory, to be superseded by the work of his successors. He was very conscious of his role as a founder and took great pains to separate his efforts from those of his predecessors. A severe critic of the humanist tradition of historiography, he yet embraced its rhetorical and narrative traditions wholeheartedly. Ranke had slight sympathy for the monographic approach to historical research. He argued always that history must concern itself with important topics that profoundly influenced the human condition. His commitment to politics—and religion—sprang from this conviction. He himself was an accomplished stylist in German prose, and his works found a large audience at home and were quickly translated into other languages. He wrote for the growing number of educated readers of his time. But unlike Macaulay, whose works reflected many of the stylistic strengths of Ranke’s work, he envisioned the future of history within the dynamic professional constraints of the university.

Georg Iggers has drawn an interesting picture both of the incompleteness of Ranke’s work and of the tensions that it aroused within the historical profession in the early twentieth century. He sketches the impact of other disciplines, especially the social sciences, on history and its internal debates. His judgment, that Ranke reflected a predemocratic world, has considerable merit because it points to one of the more serious limitations that confronted Ranke in his methodological approach. Theodor Mommsen had anticipated this problem as early as 1874 in his *Rektorsrede* (inaugural address) at the University of Berlin. His criticisms seem inspired by his view of the shortcomings in Ranke’s appraisal of historical method. There is no denying that Mommsen’s concerns about overspecialization among professional historians had a certain prescience. But Ranke was hardly the prime mover behind the trend toward narrow specialization and the ignorance of other fields that Mommsen decried. Ranke has been blamed for tendencies he himself opposed.

**W**HAT BECOMES OBVIOUS as we read the essays that follow is the degree to which Ranke himself was involved in issues and problems that continue to concern historians. There is a certain danger that we will blame Ranke for not finding solutions that are compatible with later developments, while ignoring those solutions he posed for the problems confronted by himself and his contemporaries. Above all, there is some danger that we will overlook a very fundamental

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aspect of his contribution to the new discipline of history that emerged in the nineteenth century. He succeeded, largely as he intended, in creating a new instrument for civic discourse, with its trained practitioners—its priesthood, as he once said—at precisely that moment when the broadening of political participation demanded people's better understanding of the world they and their leaders were making together. The new historical discipline was ideally suited to the needs of emerging democratic societies. Possessing no technical vocabulary of its own, it communicated its results to both the elites and the masses through its writings and its place in the school systems that were serving a larger and larger portion of the population. Its emphasis on the unique, the verifiable, the human quality and condition, and its loyalty to narrative provide an enduring explanation of its capacity to reach and educate every level of society. Though its efforts have been marred by partisanship and sectarianism, the societal role of professional historians has remained fundamental to the needs of these societies.

The Rankean heritage within the contemporary discipline is at least ambiguous, but Gerhard Weinberg has raised a specter that must give us pause. How could we function in our world without the kind of professional watchdog role that the concern of historians for the preservation of historical records provides? What safeguards do these records preserve for our understanding of ourselves and our world? How could we correct our self-delusions without them and those whose task it is to interpret their contents? The great paradox of human existence is the refusal of the past to die and the danger that critical examination of the past, always fragile, may succumb. Human beings live in the narrow margins between mythic pasts and hard-won efforts at understanding their past. Leopold von Ranke asserted the importance of those efforts.





*Lithograph portrait of Ranke marked on the stone "Lith. Anst.  
v. Storch & Kramer Berlin. W. Hensel ou vix del  
1859," and handwritten on the print,  
"Labor ipse voluptas [Labor is its  
own reward] L. Ranke."*

✶



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We, Bogislav Helmuth Baron von Maltzahn, Chamberlain of his Royal Majesty of Prussia, ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary to his Imperial Royal Apostolic Majesty, etc., etc.

Hereby request all military and civilian authorities to permit the free and unimpeded travel, to and back, to the bearer of this, the royal professor of the University of Berlin, Dr. Ranke, who is undertaking scientific travel through Italy via Venice, Florence, Rome, Napels, etc. — protect him and assist him if necessary. Granted (at) Vienna on the eleventh of September 1828 One thousand eight hundred and twenty-eight

Weyman

No. 139  
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(Stamp)

[?] Geheimer [?]  
Secretary of the Legation [?]  
No. 7582

The handwritten legends are visa endorsements at various cities through which Ranke passed. The one in the lower right corner reads: No. 7582

Seen at the nunziatura (office of the papal nuncio)  
in Florence and Rome  
March 19, 1829