The crisis of the Rankean paradigm in the nineteenth century

Georg G. Iggers
THE CRISIS OF THE RANKEAN PARADIGM IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

GEORG G. IGgers

THE MORE I occupied myself with this paper, the more I came to question whether the title “The Crisis of the Rankean Paradigm” was suitable. In the course of my work I increasingly questioned whether one can speak of paradigms in Thomas Kuhn’s sense in historical studies and thus of a Rankean paradigm, and whether one can characterize the intense discussion on historical methodology at the end of the nineteenth century as a crisis in historical studies. I in fact restrict myself to more modest topics: how Ranke was understood at the end of the century not only in Germany but also elsewhere, the ways his manner of writing history still represented a model for historical studies, and the extent to which historical studies distanced themselves from this model in searching new ways of writing history.

The term “paradigm” borrowed from Kuhn has become very popular. I need only refer to Troian Stoianovich’s book on the Annales. Some observers have suggested that Niebuhr and Ranke provided a model for critical historical studies which became “paradigmatic” for historians henceforth. Yet the term paradigm suggested two things: a much more radical break with the research practices of earlier historians than was the case, and an almost universal acceptance of the new practices by historians who claimed to be scholars of history. Kuhn’s concept of paradigm assumes a degree of consensus in a period of “normal science” which simply does not exist among historians. In a sense there is a link between methods of inquiry and conceptualizations in the natural sciences which is not replicated in historical studies. Kuhn stressed the social character of science. There is no truth “out there.” What is accepted as truth is determined by the “scientific community,” not arbitrarily, but in terms of accepted standards of scientific inquiry. Until the science no longer succeeds in solving the problems it has set for itself, there exists a broad consensus not only in methods but also in interpretations. The transition from one paradigm to another is “revolutionary” rather than “evolutionary,” a position which can be questioned even in the history of science and in a sense is contradicted by Kuhn’s own earlier description of the “Copernican Revolution.” Changes in conceptions of historical inquiry occur differently. At most, one can speak of a paradigm in methods of source criticism; yet these methods did not suddenly emerge in Ranke’s seminars but had a long prehistory, even if they had never been applied as systematically and rigorously before as they were in Ranke’s time.
David Hollinger has suggested that “while not a ‘science,’ the discipline of history is at least an academically organized branch of inquiry” and in this sense “resembles Kuhn’s scientific communities.” “Historians,” he continued, “have been less eager than social scientists to attribute to themselves the practice of ‘normal science’ under controlling ‘paradigms,’” yet they have “operate[d] with a sense that their discipline can be practiced with varying degrees of success,” involving interdisciplinary standards. If we accept Hollinger’s formulation, Ranke’s contribution to the transformation of history, if not into a science in the English sense of the term, at least into an academic discipline, rested on the success with which he laid the foundations at the University of Berlin for a professional community consisting of “tightly organized, self-contained trained groups of experts bound together by rigorously defined systems and highly technical methods,” which on closer examination did not turn out to be all that technical, in my opinion.

The extent to which professionalization made history a more rigorous science is an open question. The social context which Kuhn stressed in the physical sciences is very different in history and involves factors of ideology and politics which, in this direct form, do not normally enter into scientific research, whereas in historical studies the influence is directly on both the questions asked and the answers found. And these questions and conclusions affect method. Toqueville, Fustel de Coulanges, Burchhardt, and Marx worked differently methodologically without necessarily being less committed to intersubjectively acceptable historical understanding—although Burchhardt was quite willing to question the character of history as a science and stress its aesthetic aspects. It is difficult to make a clear line between a pre-scientific stage (scientific here in the sense of Wissenschaft, not the English “science”) and a scientific stage, between what Kuhn called preparadigmatic and paradigmatic stages for other sciences. Historians in the age of Ranke agreed on clear guidelines for the critical treatment of sources, but there were no clear guidelines for establishing the connectedness of events, even if Droysen and Dilthey dealt with the problem.* Non-Rankean historians like Michelet did not deal that differently with the evidence, and literary quality and literary effect played significant roles in Ranke’s prose.

THE RUPTURE BETWEEN the great literary tradition of history in the eighteenth century, particularly in Great Britain and France, and the scientific tradition of history in nineteenth-century Germany was by no means as great as has often been suggested. Ranke, like Michelet and Macaulay, wrote primarily for an educated public. Lord Acton observed that Ranke “expects no professional knowledge in his readers, and never writes for specialists.” History in fact became a profession but, if we for a moment exclude the cliometricians of recent times, never became a highly technical discipline. It is significant for the way in which the late nineteenth- and the early twentieth-century history viewed history that it bestowed the Nobel Prize for Literature on Theodor Mommsen. The new scholarly history, moreover, was openly committed politically in a way the natural sciences were not. The post-Rankean historians worked in the archives not to let the sources tell their story as they claimed, but to support their arguments in pursuit of national, political, and religious aims. Ranke, unlike


Sybel and Droysen, proclaimed his impartiality and objectivity, but this objectivity assumed the givenness of an essentially conservative order of things. Nevertheless, historians, particularly in the United States and Germany, were willing to see him as the founder of the modern model of scientific history. American historians in the late nineteenth century spoke of him as the "father of historical science." Indeed, the definition of historical science became identical with that of Rankean method as it was understood. The distinction between history as a science and the natural sciences was recognized; the neo-Darwinian attempts to make history into a positivistic science were rejected but the canon of objectivity stressed, to which Ranke was devoted. The core of Ranke's method consisted of "narrat[ing] things as they really were, wie es eigentlich gewesen." All historians claiming scientific stature, according to George B. Adams in his presidential address at the meeting of the American Historical Association in 1908, identified themselves with the school of Ranke. "It is true," he observed, "that all technically trained historians for more than fifty years have been trained according to these ideas and they have all found it exceedingly difficult to free themselves from the fundamental principle of their school that the first duty of the historian is to ascertain as nearly as possible and to record exactly what happened." History is a craft basically free from philosophy and literature. "Teaching has taken the place of brilliancy and the whole world is today reaping the benefit," wrote Ephraim Emerton at Harvard in praise of Ranke. This divorce from philosophy and theory was in a different way also the avowed aim of the so-called neo-Rankean school in Germany at the turn of the century, which attempted, unsuccessfully, to free history of its political aims and to base it on the foundations of objective, contemplative study of the forces operating in modern history.

But to see a profession of "technically trained historians," as Adams did, united in their assumptions on how history was to be written, overlooks the broad diversity of historical studies in the nineteenth century. The uniqueness of Ranke by no means stood out as clearly to the great majority of professional historians at the turn of the century as it did to the American school of "scientific history" or to the German neo-Rankeans. Gabriel Monod and Lord Acton, in fact, agreed that "no country has contributed more to giving historical studies a rigorous scientific character than Germany." But they saw this rigorous science very differently from the positivistic notions of the American Rankeans. "It would not be just," commented Monod, "to imagine as it sometimes done that German science is deprived of general ideas and restricts itself to researching erudite curiosities. . . . It is thanks to general ideas that the historical sciences can really merit to be called scientific." In Monod's opinion, Germany had made a very important contribution to modern historical studies in providing the institutional and educational basis for the training of historians at the universities, which became an important model for the reform of French higher education. It is interesting that for Monod and Acton, as well as for the participants in the international Congress of Arts and Sciences in 1904, Ranke is not seen as the outstanding historian of the nineteenth century, nor is the German school of historians singled out despite its contribution to scientific rigor but is rather seen as part of a rich international tradition of historical studies which includes Macaulay, Taine, Bancroft, and Renan. Ranke, in fact, had more in common with them.
than with narrowly trained specialists. The nineteenth century reflects a pluralism of historical approaches which differed sharply from the state-centered narrative of Ranke and that of the Prussian school. We need only mention the attempts to deal with the interaction of culture, society, and politics, often from a highly analytical viewpoint, in the diverse works of Guizot, Germin, Tocqueville, Burckhardt, Fustel de Coulanges, Michelet, Lorenz von Stein, Green, Taine, and Marx. In Charles Langlois and Charles Seignobos' important manual of historical method, Introduction aux études historiques, which, unlike Ernst Bernheim's much more thoughtful Lehrbuch, was translated at once into English, Ranke did not appear at all, although the beneficial German influence on the reform of historical studies was mentioned. Though their standpoint resembled that of the American school of scientific history, they did not claim Ranke as their spiritual ancestor and rejected Droysen's Grundriss der Historik as "heavy, pedantic, and confused" and Bernheim as too philosophical.

If there was no ruling paradigm of historical studies, there could, of course, also be no crisis of such a paradigm. Nevertheless, after 1890 there was a lively discussion on the direction in which historical studies in an increasingly industrial and democratic age should go. I have already mentioned two positive assessments of Ranke, that of the American "scientific" school and that of the German neo-Rankeans. Both of these rested on misunderstandings of Ranke: in the case of the Americans as a result of not having read him properly, in the case of the neo-Rankeans in a conscious attempt to utilize him for their ends in propagandizing an expansive, semiautocratic nation-state. Neo-Rankeans such as Max Lenz, Erich Marx, Felix Rachfahl, and Alfred Dove rejected the supposed liberalism of the Prussian school and wished to return to the nonpartisan objectivity of Ranke, who placed the balance of power among the great states at the center of his historical interests. But Ranke was too much of a European and hardly an advocate of German Weltpolitik for them honestly to identify with him. Their apotheosis of the nation, their search for German world status, their determination to break the dominant power of Great Britain overseas all bore closer resemblance to Treitschke's conception of Germany's mission. They turned with a vengeance against Karl Lamprecht, who in his German History (beginning to appear in 1891) offered an alternative model for writing history and in his theoretical writings took Ranke and his successors to task. History must be a total history in which culture and society have their place with politics. Ranke, in Lamprecht's opinion, was still less guilty of neglecting society than those who followed him. Ranke's claim of objectivity, however, rested on the highly metaphysical assumptions of German idealistic philosophy. His latter-day disciples had wished to free him from his metaphysical language but had taken over his metaphysical substance. For Ranke, states had been "spiritual" entities, "ideas of God," which combined the real and the ideal in one. The neo-Rankeans had taken over this apotheosis of power. History can only become a science when, like other sciences, it raises hypotheses and seeks causal explanations. This call for a new history, which sought a sociocultural synthesis and established a link between its own inquiry and the various sciences of society, was taken seriously internationally. 18-24

C. Langlois and C. Seignobos, Introduction aux études historiques (Paris: Hachette et Cie, 1898); E. Bernheim's Lehrbuch der historischen Methode (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1889) went through many editions, later under the title Lehrbuch der historischen Methode und der Geschichtphilosophie.

Langlois and Seignobos, Etudes historiques, xi, 297.


Krill, Die Ranke-Renaissance, 357.

Particular thanks to Lamprecht, Alt und neue Richtungen in der Geschichtswissenschaft (Berlin: Weidmann, 1896). There is extensive literature on the Lamprecht con-
It constituted a conscious repudiation of the Rankean tradition. But the attempt to formulate sociopsychological laws of national development was received skeptically as a return to a metaphysics of history.

German historical scholarship for the most part did not go along with the attempts, least of all Lamprecht's, to introduce conceptual rigor and social categories. Meinecke's obituary of Sybel, as much an implicit critique of Lamprecht as an explicit eulogy of Sybel,28 reasserted the value of the idealistic tradition with its attachment to the State. While Bernheim essentially endorsed the German scholarly tradition against the attempts to introduce generalizations into history, he nevertheless recognized that "historical science has progressed [since Ranke]," particularly in taking into account "sociological" factors.26 The international discussion went largely in other directions. Alexandru Xenopol joined sides with the German critics of Lamprecht in stressing the role of spontaneity in history which limited the utility of generalizations and excluded the formulation of laws.27 Johan Huizinga sided fully with the idealists in the Methoden dispute. For him, Dilthey's formulation of a logic of inquiry for the Geisteswissenschaft had made obsolete the conception of a historical science championed by Lamprecht.28

The crisis of the Rankean paradigm

But the dominant climate of historical thought outside of Germany was perhaps better reflected in the papers at the Congress of Arts and Sciences held in conjunction with the Universal Exposition in St. Louis, which sought to assess the status of the sciences, including history, at the turn of the century.29 In the special section on "Historical Science," at which Woodrow Wilson, Frederick Jackson Turner, James Harvey Robinson, William Milligan Sloane, J. B. Bury, and Karl Lamprecht presented papers, there was a consensus, as Woodrow Wilson put it in his opening lecture, that "we have seen the dawn and the early morning hours of a new age in the writing of history." What marked the consensus was the belief that "minute research" must be combined with "broad synthesis." Wilson commented that narrative must be supplemented by analysis, the history of events by interpretation, political history by social history.30 This note was repeated in all the presentations. History could not be confined to politics, Bury warned. "Political development... is correlated with other developments which are not political; the concrete history of a society is the collective history of all its various activities, all the manifestations of its intellectual, emotional and material life."31 The human factors are no longer heroes, kings, warriors or diplomats, merely and alone;" wrote Sloane, "but the people as well in all their activities."32 Similarly, Turner wrote that "the problems most important for consideration by historians of America are not those of the narrative of events or of the personality of leaders, but rather those which arise when American history is viewed as the record of society in a wilderness environment."33 There was, of course, a political note behind the criticism of the traditional historiography of elites in the call for a democratic history.34 Yet the call for a history which took into account social factors by no means signified a break with traditional methods of criticism or with narrative. Turner and Robinson called for the close cooperation between history and the social sciences without believing that history itself constituted a social science. Robinson elsewhere called attention to Marx and...
to Jaurès, who, by introducing economic factors, had provided a tool "to explain far more of the phenomena than any other single explanation ever offered." Turner urged that "data drawn from . . . politics, economics, sociology, psychology, biology, and physiography," but also from literature and art, "must be used." Yet the conception of history as a science seeking to formulate laws in the sense of Buckle was repudiated. Lamprecht alone defined history as "primarily a socio-psychological science." Robinson stressed that "history can never become a science in the sense that physics, chemistry, physiology, or even anthropology is a science." Nor must the traditional "alliance of history and literature" be broken.

There were no French participants in the section on "Historical Science" in St. Louis. But there had been an active debate in France in the 1890s on historical method, which had begun with Emile Durkheim's attack on the claim of traditional historiography to scientific status, with Paul Lacombe's call for a science of history patterned on the logic of inquiry prevailing in the other sciences, and with Xénopol's defense of a unique logic of historical inquiry. Henri Berr in 1900 founded the Revue de synthèse historique as an international forum to explore the basic methodological and logical issue of historical science. All sides were represented in the early issues of the journal: the defenders of a unique historical method, such as Xénopol, Rickert, and Croce; and the advocates of history as a social science, such as Lacombe, Simiand, and Lamprecht. History, Berr noted, "has lost its contact with life" not because it is "too scientific but on the contrary because it is not sufficiently so." Berr, as the title of the journal suggested, wanted a historical synthesis, an escape from "the excesses of analysis and specialization," an occupation with all aspects of life not primarily politics, and a cooperation with the various social sciences. Yet history should not be reduced or subordinated to sociology, as Durkheim suggested. But Berr rejected the counterposition defended by Scignobos, which rejected any "systematic" or "logical principle" in order to be guided by a supposed "empirical order" that examined the phenomena "in the order in which they present themselves to the imagination." No history is possible without clearly formulated questions and hypotheses.

H O W D I D T H E T H E O R E T I C A L discussion affect historical practice and what was left of the Rankean tradition? In Germany there was an attempt to revive Ranke, to continue along traditional lines. The German scene was, of course, not monolithic, although the pressures for conformity limited dissent, as in the case of the career of Kurt Bresig. Lamprecht did not disappear from the scene and was able to establish his Institute for Cultural and Universal History in Leipzig in 1909, which had a continuing impact on Landesgeschichte even after Lamprecht's death. But the overall reaction, reinforced by domestic tensions in Germany before 1914 and by war and defeat thereafter, was against an analytical social history. Hintze's interesting comparative work on feudalism and capitalism came in the 1920s when, due to ill-health, he was isolated from students and effective influence. Weber's innovative historical sociology was not accepted as history by the guild. The Zeitschrift für Social- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte (later refounded as Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte), an

---

42. Berr, La Synthèse en histoire, 40–41.


The international, multilingual journal established in the 1890s by a group of Austrian socialists, including Ludo Moritz Hartmann, who had very definite notions about the revitalization of history, lost its international connections under the editorship of the archconservative Georg von Below and treated economic history from the perspective of constitutional and administrative questions.

Outside of Germany the search for new patterns of social history was more pronounced. A number of works appeared in the period between 1890 and 1914 that were different in approach and outlook: Jean Jaures' "socialist" histories of the French Revolution and of nineteenth-century France; Henri Pirenne's history of Belgium; Alfons Dopsch's economic and cultural history of the Middle Ages; Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb's and Barbara Hammond and John Hammond's histories of British workers; Charles Beard's economic interpretation of the American constitutional convention; Elie Halévy's history of philosophic radicalism in England; and, despite his dislike for the new social history in general and Karl Lamprecht in particular, Johan Huizinga's The Waning of the Middle Ages.

Thus, by 1914 there had been a reorientation in historical studies, although much work continued along traditional patterns. But the new histories, too, had roots in the nineteenth century, in as diverse sources as French social and cultural history, the German historical school of national economy, and Marx. In a fundamental but limited sense the Rankean tradition lived on in the way that professional historians worked with sources. But new approaches required new kinds of sources, which Ranke had neglected, and new ways of analyzing them that differed from the traditional hermeneutic method. In a fundamental sense, the Rankean tradition and that of its direct German successors came to an end, although it clung on to life in Germany for several decades longer. The times had changed and so had the structure of the modern world. Ranke had been too deeply rooted in a predemocratic age.
The von Ranke Library
at Syracuse University

Throughout the course of his life, Leopold von Ranke built a great personal historical library as the foundation for his research. Ranke believed that for historians to obtain a clear picture of the events of an era, they must rely not on the general official histories written after the fact, but on the archives and documents of that era.

As Professor at the University of Berlin, Ranke had a profound influence on his students—among them, Charles Wesley Bennett, later a member of the original faculty of Syracuse University. While at Syracuse, Bennett served as Professor of History and Logic, chair of the History Department and, from 1874 to 1884, university librarian.

With generous support from Dr. John Morrison Reid (former president of Syracuse's parent institution, Genesee College, and president of the new university's board of trustees) and his wife Caroline Reid, Bennett dedicated himself to the acquisition of the von Ranke library. From the initial decision (in 1875) until Ranke's death in 1886 at age 91, Bennett kept abreast of the library's value and acquisitions through book buyers in Berlin. Upon hearing of von Ranke's death and fearing that the dealers would not act with sufficient haste (there were at least five other major institutions rumored to be interested in all or part of the library), Bennett approached Otto von Ranke (the oldest son and intermediator for the heirs) directly.

Impressed by Bennett's earnestness and respect for his father's work, Otto agreed to give him first rights to the collection if it was not purchased by the Prussian government. Concerned with impending war, the government dawdled and failed on two counts to meet the heirs' terms: (1) The offering price was absurdly low; (2) Officials intended to divide the collection among various universities. This was in direct conflict with Leopold von Ranke's wish that the library be kept intact.

In March of 1887, after months of anxious waiting, Bennett sent a message to Otto stating that he had exactly two weeks to make his decision. The ultimatum worked, and Otto von Ranke agreed to sell the collection to Syracuse University with the stipulation that it be "housed as an entirety in a room specially built for the purpose." The Reids then fulfilled their ten-year promise to fund the purchase of the collection upon the condition that SU build a separate, fireproof building to house it. In 1889 the von Ranke Library at Syracuse University, designed by Archimedes Russell, was dedicated. Today that facility serves as the Tolley Administration Building, and the collection is now located in the George Arents Research Library on the sixth floor of Bird Library.