

The Turn Towards 'Science': Historians Delivering Untheorized Truth

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A certain unease has always characterized historians' relation to theory in the West and no single period has shown itself free from that discomfiture. But perhaps one can identify an extended moment in western historical discourse – one running from around 1870 to at least the First World War and possibly the Second – when new currents of excitement over the possibility of unending discovery surrounded historical writing and captivated a young historical profession desperate to assert its cultural authority. Never had the exuberance of 'scientists' (an 1830s word) been so marked, never their achievements so remarkable by 1870. No century had produced so many scientific advances as the nineteenth. It was not simply that Darwinist biology had placed human and natural history in a novel and compelling frame since 1859, with many implications for the nature of historical development as a whole. Spectacular feats of engineering and technology, from iron ships to transatlantic cables to the first, unsteady flights of man-made machines accelerated the sense of time

itself as space reduced seemingly to a conquerable sphere.¹ The city, with its new ethnicities and social problems, declared its primacy as a unit of analysis to which the new disciplines of sociology and anthropology turned their eye and made historians quarrel over their own apparent failure to look in that direction. Economies, in an era of first and second industrial revolutions, became urgent objects of study as 'political economy' lost its impressionistic gentility from 1870 and became a science quite as mathematical as it was dismal. Class and popular unrest in the wake of the Paris Commune and the first Russian revolution scarcely fitted whig complacencies about social harmony or the everlasting progress promised by an invisible hand. Even theology demonstrated that nothing was sacred with it historicized Christ, its patter of 'hermeneutics', its search for deeper, more authentic narrative and exegesis. The world demanded new forms and levels of answer to the questions its radical nature implicitly posed; and those demands invaded more

than the laboratories and consulting rooms of a Curie or a Freud. Present urgencies informed each section of the past believed relevant to understanding it and historians found themselves faced with a dilemma: whether to prosecute the subject in its traditional modes – biography, constitutional narrative, uplifting accounts of burgeoning democracy and freedom – or to face into the wind, rethink and retool. We shall see that the dilemma produced no uniform pattern in the response of historians but that, whatever it produced, it left behind a sense of the historical enterprise that felt different from those depicted by previous generations – one receptive to analysis, untainted by subjectivity, licensed by scientific credential.

All of this owed something to changing structures imposed by a new 'profession' and those developments prompt a pause in any study of historical theory because the structures carried a theoretical imprimatur that made itself no less persistent (or dangerous) for its lacking self-awareness. Coincidental with Darwin's *Origins* (1859), the foundation of Berlin's *Historische Zeitschrift* marked a significant departure in systematizing knowledge and offered an example of what a more professional forum might look like. And indeed the German academy established a clear leadership in the movement to establish chairs of history and turn Berlin, Göttingen, Bonn, Leipzig into significant nodes of historical 'research' – itself a concept drawn from the natural sciences – that drew to the German historical schools promising young men from France, Britain and the United States.² So often in the biographies of major historians who flourished in the half-century after 1860 one finds among the experiences of their early life a period of study in German universities where young scholars learned the language, absorbed the culture and sometimes the Idealism of their new environment and brought home both a training in the scientific treatment of sources – *Quellenkritik* – and a role-model in the century's greatest historical genius, Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886). Yet, one after the other,

those other countries followed where Germany had led in establishing their own professoriate and opening graduate schools in which their students could be home-grown. By the turn of century, Johns Hopkins and Columbia had asserted the nativism of graduate study in their new schools aimed at retaining the best of the new generation at home. By 1885 Paris had established an academic regime in history that already threatened to overtake the German establishment.³ By 1900 the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge had made significant strides in developing a new cadre of British historians, though the real energy-centres for the move came in the newer, technological universities that emerged in the context of economic depression after 1885, apart from their pioneer institution, Owens College, that would shortly become the University of Manchester with its formidable intellectual leader in the medievalist Thomas Frederick Tout (1855–1929).⁴

That each of these trajectories towards establishing a salaried historical profession led their societies in significant directions and guided the kinds of education available to their young seems obvious enough. Less apparent may be the degree to which this climate of historical work was not theoretically neutral. It formed in reaction to a style of historical writing carried out by the gentlemen scholars of a more sedate epoch, the expansive age of Bancroft, Motley, Macaulay, Carlyle and Michelet. These romantic narrators had not merely assumed but self-consciously theorized that the point of writing lay in communicating a story with a plot to readers who resided mostly outside the academy. The cliché that reminds us that Macaulay wanted his historical books to grace the lady's dressing table along with the latest three-decker novel is relevant to the theme but misses the seriousness of his intention. It was not a matter of selling books or becoming famous – though both had their attractions; he wanted to insist rather that history *consisted* in that presentation of pictures to the imagination that his earlier essays had asserted as fundamental to the historical enterprise. Evidence mattered, to a

degree, though imagination could infuse it in ways that laboratory study would declare illegitimate. Equally, knowledge – understood as the accumulation of certified facts – would remain the precondition for all successful historical evocation. Joining all these prescriptions together in a seamless fabric of the created past, however, the idea of narrative played a central role and with it the art (it could be no less) of constructing it in a form that satisfied the objective of stimulating the reader's sense of being there among the events portrayed, seeing them happen in the mind's eye as might a fascinated observer watching through a window. The past became compelling by its having been rendered into a present through which author and reader could experience its immediacy, share the thrill of great figures, exciting panoramas. In that way the present discovered, too, an explanation of itself: how we got from how things were then to where they are now. So history had learned to reconnect readers to a real but transient state of affairs in the past and by so doing deepened their self-location and understanding in a vision that struck many as noble and satisfying.

The new dispensation did not abolish that vision but rather introduced protocols for limiting it. Training in the rigours of source-criticism militated against emotional excess. 'Imagination' began its long and tortuous journey away from a recommendatory term with its own adjective ('imaginative') to a negative term with a contemptuous one ('imaginary'). Astonishing strides in laboratory and natural sciences beckoned history forward to a better-grounded future, one that rested on a fresh conception of *method* that would focus on a revised notion of appropriate content. Quite how frictionless the process might become depended to an extent on which culture attempted it. For the Anglophone world it would always prove slow and partial. So rich was the 'whig' heritage that no matter how scientific prominent historians might turn out to be, a recalcitrant minority would always hold out for the older model of communicative sympathy and drama.⁵ For the French it fed from a very different

stream. The espousal of science as an historian's objective ran back into the first half of the century and the generation of Guizot.⁶ The age of Gabriel Monod and Hyppolyte Taine had but to deepen an existing cultural tendency. Americans, meanwhile, had whigs of their own but picked up some of the new movements after the foundation of their own specialist journal, the *American Historical Review*, in 1895 and the emergence of a self-conscious New History some years later. Italians had no whigs but plenty of Hegelians and Marxists, which kept them out of the laboratory for longer than most.

This horizon dominated by an emerging conception of 'science' merits a moment of reflection to consider just three texts from these divergent nations that commented in a very direct way on the new development. To place Britain first feels paradoxical but then everything about Henry Thomas Buckle (1821–62) attracts paradox: the eccentricities of a gentleman scholar, the combination of vision and madness that infused his unfinished *History of Civilization in England* (1857–8), the echoes of Comte and the younger Mill, the undertow of animus against the history of kings and queens, the premature death. Yet Buckle mattered for his status as a pioneer of a strain of thought that others would take forward, often by bouncing off his passionate text. The world of 1850s rationalism leaps from every page and showed how the world did not need to wait for *On the Origin of Species*, which appeared in the following year, to anticipate the call for making history the study of laws of development made accessible to the intellect by a reformed historical method that would rise above describing contingency to find regularity:

This expectation of discovering regularity in the midst of confusion is so familiar to scientific men that among the most eminent of them it becomes an article of faith: and if the same expectation is not generally found among historians, it must be ascribed partly to their being of inferior quality to the investigators of nature, and partly to the great complexity of those social phenomena with which their studies are concerned.⁷

That few thought his programme feasible or desirable does not detract from Buckle's significance as a major irritant. Lord Acton's review of him was, as always, masterly and, more than usually, conclusive. Its terms bear recalling because they announce the frame of the discussion that would so often surround the discourse of history as a *Naturwissenschaft* for the next hundred years. Lord Acton's famous review of Buckle pinned him to the board like a dead insect, alleging that history would degenerate into 'tabular views of births, deaths, marriages, diseases, prices, commerce, and the like; and the historian would be chiefly useful in providing grocers with cheap paper to wrap up butter in'.⁸ For all that, thoughtful commentators on the place of science in history frequently began their thinking with Buckle if only to transcend him.

One who certainly felt his influence lived far away in Florence. Italian culture is often marginalized through linguistic ignorance but any temptation to ignore Pasquale Villari (1826–1917) would mislead any student of the scientific turn. Best known for his political career – Villari committed himself impressively to the ideals of the *Risorgimento* and the politics of Garibaldi in 1859–60, with a senatorial and ministerial career later in his life – he became simultaneously the historian of Florence, of Savonarola, of Machiavelli. What he brought to these studies was a peculiarly Italian sense of materialism as the basic drive of action and a view of method that would capture that drive in a systematic way. He found Buckle stimulating in this quest and wrote an essay about him in 1883. But the text for which he deserves to be remembered is a long essay called 'Is history a science?', which he wrote shortly before completing a term as Minister of Public Instruction and that was published in 1891. Reverting to Buckle but also now to J.R. Seeley, Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, Villari felt his early radicalism confirmed in recent controversy and reiterated his stress on science as the key to historical method:

In reality, the scientific method is the only true method, the literary method a false one. The former – unknown before the present day – seeks the *principles* of politics, the *laws* of events, and these can be learned from history alone.⁹

The historian's task becomes threefold when pursuing this agenda: to discover facts, to learn presentation ('a literary labour') but most importantly to seek 'the logical connection of events, the laws by which they are ruled'.¹⁰ Yet he had moved on from the early, crude assertions about history as a nomothetic – i.e. law-seeking – form of enquiry and his Italian cultural background with its continuing emphasis on the relevance on Hegel, reinforced by the genius of Benedetto Croce,¹¹ and the urgency of Marxist analysis, such as that epitomized in Labriola,¹² prevented him from espousing in later life the mechanical prescriptions of Buckle or Wilhelm Wundt or his own contemporary and critic, de Sanctis.¹³ The title of his essay ended in a question mark, after all, and Villari's ultimate position is one that fretted about *reducing* history to science. He urged historians to 'desist from ... futile attempts to go beyond social and moral facts' and realize that their subject 'can never be converted into a philosophical system, nor into a natural or mathematical science'.¹⁴ As Maria Luisa Cicalese perceptively notes, Villari found himself trapped *between* scientific positivism and Italian Idealism: he wanted both to defend scientific method and a conception of history that protected social, religious and above all patriotic values.¹⁵ Science would never satisfy the ultimate needs of man and never penetrate to the inner of world of individual intention. Villari's world retains its reflection of Croce's: individual and world are not separable and individuality embodies universality.

From a very different direction the search for science in a world characterized by ungovernable, chaotic individuals also found a voice in the French historian Paul Lacombe whose treatise *De l'Histoire Considérée Comme Science* followed three years after Villari's in 1894. The first explosion of a

Durkheimian ‘sociology’ had already left its scars on the Parisian intellectual landscape. Indeed Lacombe toyed with the idea of writing a book about that instead of history and might have done so had not the new sociology come to feel ‘un peu exclusive’ though its penchant for studying only ‘les peuples sauvages et barbares’.¹⁶ He wanted to assert a method and content that would relate to modern society, not Aborigines and Zulus, and the reclamation of its past. In order to do that one would need to break some eggs.

What, then, is my basic plan? In the first place to show that history can be placed on a scientific footing and, second, that it can only be so placed if it concentrates on certain kinds of material at the expense of others and preference certain methodological procedures, recognizing the insufficiency of some other procedures currently better thought of¹⁷

It was a brave manifesto and also an authoritative one, coming as it did from the Inspector General of Libraries and Archives. But the tone of the volume hardly reflected the *mentalité* of bookstack and folio. From the first page Lacombe recalls Buckle and Taine with wild swipes at existing practice and unevicenced assertions about the forces that control how people behave. These are twofold. For the individual they are psychological and he echoes his more distinguished contemporary, Wilhelm Dilthey, in crediting history with the power to become the true psychology that would reveal a vertical list of drives that begin with food and go down through reproduction to lesser forces. For the social individual they are economic. These forces should become the target-content of history and the historian should see as the primary task of the discipline in the evocation of ‘l’homme général’ who is the solution to the problem of individual randomness found in anecdotal accounts. Of course, Lacombe knows that it is those discrete individuals who make things happen in the world. ‘That is why so many people announce that history cannot be a science. They are absolutely right if we make the individual and individuality

[*l’individu et l’individuel*] one and the same or, to put it another way, if the individual does not always embody those elements that make him similar and equivalent to other individuals.’¹⁸ But (s)he always does, in Lacombe’s account. A fundamental objection to his notion of a scientific history thus drops away because he contends that it is possible to study man as opposed to men and to do so historically provided that this expanded individual is placed in a frame that combines space and time. ‘The real object of a scientific history is man set in time and space, temporal man or what one might call historical man ...’¹⁹ Like economic man, moreover, this constructed human being is amendable to *hypothesis* since he only has three characteristics – wealth, morality and intelligence – and that incision opens the possibility of a science that will avoid all the messiness of induction of the kind that one finds in conventional historical theory, and reveals a comparative, deductive model of human behaviour that will lend its results something approaching certainty.²⁰

Each of these texts conveys a flavour of the scientific moment of the late nineteenth century: the suffusive environment of evolutionary language, the urgency of new methodologies and the reflections of a science of economics that had supplanted the older styles of political economy. The nations that gave rise to them say something, too, about the European currents that would inform discussion of history-as-science for the next half-century. As that argument ran forwards from the 1890s, however, its texture derived less from Britain or Italy or France than from the most avidly-professionalizing historical culture in Europe. Germany was different. Germany had everything: a deep seam of Idealist philosophy running back to Kant and Hegel that would always contradict scientific method; an obsessive commitment to biology, chemistry and psychology that would contradict any other way of proceeding; and a panoply of great literature that insisted on the centrality of *Kultur*, an explosion of empirical discovery that insisted no less

loudly on making science culture's vehicle. It could only end in tears when the dominance of Rankean historical tools came under challenge in the decade after the great man's death in 1886. Not for nothing do we use a German theoretical vocabulary in thinking about the *Methodenstreit* of the 1890s. The quarrel over method, for it exceeded debate or argument, permeated all aspects of German intellectual life and in retrospect it focused many of the strands of discussion about the future of history that every country of the West had been facing, each in its own way.

Because other cultures had their own story to tell about the nature of historical enquiry, there is some justification for seeing the *Methodenstreit* as simply a German manifestation of a more general theoretical malaise among those concerned about the future of the humanities in the 1890s. Current scholars tend to have a *penchant* for finding such links and crossovers, moreover, so it is hardly surprising that a mood of reduction has entered the literature in thinking about the bitter German quarrels that historians once read as specific and unique. Georg Iggers has reminded us, for example, that a significant Austrian element should not be ignored: the foundation of Vienna's *Zeitschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* in 1893 brought that voice into the German discussion and underlined the mistake of treating (say) Karl Lamprecht – of whom more shortly – as an isolated case of revolt against established practices.²¹ Or one might recur to the French case and individuals such as Durkheim and Simiand and outlets that propagated the new approaches: one thinks at once of Henri Berr's *Revue de Synthèse* (1900) and the *Société d'Histoire Moderne* (1901–3).²² It brooks no denial that some form of tectonic movement within European and American historical culture had begun by 1890 and that it would have exerted serious influences on historical writing even if the German arguments had proved less vocal than they were. Like all explanations of change, however, this view of the matter may be overworked. German academia did have distinctive features, structures

and assumptions; and the argument over method reached a degree of focus and passion that other countries felt only in more minor key. One can always find analogous developments when thinking about comparative intellectual or cultural history whose protagonists read foreign languages and attend international colloquia. What gives each country or state its particular flavour none the less is the modulations and personalities that gave the arguments and personalities their relevance for that culture. Every state in Europe could in principle have produced a Lamprecht and a Weber; it was the Germans who did and for largely German reasons.

The soil from which a seed of this kind might spring had a peculiar richness and depth. In the 40 years before Lamprecht burst on the national historiographical consciousness, German historians had taken positions which prepared the way for the events of the 1890s. Their godfather – Leopold von Ranke – dominated the stage until the 1880s with a degree of authority that promised, one day, a backlash and a turn to move in directions of which he had disapproved. Darwinian science had made its presence felt and been denounced by those committed to forms of empiricist positivism, such as Georg Waitz, and by those no less committed to literary paradigms of historical representation – Mommsen, Droysen, Ranke himself – so historians knew long before the 1890s about reactions to 'scientism' as a form of procedure.²³ On the other side of the argument the new German economic history associated with Schmoller, Roscher, Knies and others had begun, however tentatively, the characterization of the past in terms of typologies. Indeed it was not accidental that the original instigation of the *Methodenstreit* – the word dates from the early 1880s – can be traced to a robust critique of Schmoller by the Austrian economist Carl Menger arguing against the new 'historical' school. That argument produced a discussion of models and typologies that in their turn became stepping-stones for Max Weber, it has been argued, on his way to thinking through how types might

illuminate reality rather than conceal it.²⁴ No less influential was the force of psychology and an assumed relationship with a kind of socio-biological determinism. Its most extreme proponent, Wilhelm Wundt, reduced intentionality to a raft of external, invisible causes. ‘Everything occurs mechanically,’ he said, ‘and customs produce moral consequences without the latter having been either wished or foreseen.’²⁵ That Lamprecht met him when he studied in Leipzig in the late 1870s may well have been formative. What remains certain is that the appearance of the early volumes of Lamprecht’s *Deutsche Geschichte* lit the bonfire that these previous decades had helped pile.

Karl Lamprecht (1856–1915) occupies a prominent place in the story of ‘scientific history’, not because of what he achieved but rather through the manner of his failure. Originally an economic historian of the middle ages, he turned in his middle years to the development of ideas about comparative history across societies but also an enhanced social psychology as a way of investigating them internally. The former he brought into play through his edition of a series to which he invited, among others, the great Belgian historian Henri Pirenne to contribute.²⁶ His concern with social psychology penetrated, with an increasing shrillness, his own contribution, his massive *Deutsche Geschichte* that appeared in 14 volumes between 1895 and 1909. A new edition of the first volume in 1894 gave rise to controversy through its emphasis on collective forces and typologies: the need to apply what nowadays might be called ‘social holism’ to historical problems by conceiving a society to be more than just the sum of its parts or the actions of individuals. Explanation on this level involved more than description or evocation; it demanded that the historian search for deep causal structures and show how they operated over time.²⁷ The year 1894 turned out to be a signal one for such pronouncements. In that year, in a lecture at Strasbourg, the philosopher Wilhelm Windelband²⁸ spoke about ‘History and the Natural Sciences’ and

popularized a distinction that became part of the controversy in which Lamprecht had implicated himself – that between a ‘nomothetic’ discipline or area of study and an ‘idiographic’ one – between subjects whose content allowed explanation resting on laws and others where only a sophisticated form of depiction or evocation would remain possible. Which one worked for history? Lamprecht explicitly called for explanation couched in the language of covering laws and deprecated historians, even and especially Ranke, who had contented themselves with a form of mystical connection with the past through the minds and intentions of individuals. Unsurprisingly, these contentions brought a storm of criticism from professional historians who felt that not only their role-model but their entire discipline had been traduced by a nobody from the University of Leipzig, hardly the centre of German academia. Lamprecht replied in a considered and important statement of his position by contrasting conventional modes of approaching history with the ‘new directions’ in which he believed history must go.²⁹ Seeking only a ‘Debatte über die Prinzipien unserer Wissenschaft’, he walked into a wall of professional resistance.³⁰

The details of that resistance have a grim fascination but need not detain us here. It will be enough to understand that through the second half of the 1890s Lamprecht became vilified and marginalized. Not that the argument lay completely on his side. Very few historians today would endorse the scientism that Lamprecht wanted to visit on the profession and some of the reservations expressed by his contemporaries seem both intelligent and necessary. More to the point, however, is the style of his undoing by a rising class of *Jungrankianer* – ambitious young professionals making their way in a competitive and hierarchically structured environment, determined to crush Lamprecht because he threatened the kind of history that they had been taught to write and the career that they expected their writing to generate. Lamprecht himself failed to see what was happening to

him and returned continually to the unfairness of his critics in not understanding his intellectual case. He would rail to his friend Pirenne about his treatment and receive soothing letters in beautiful French: 'Il m'a semblé que l'auteur n'avait compris ni votre but, ni votre méthode, et les traits qu'il lance tombent sans vous atteindre'³¹; or, most perceptively, following an attack by Finke in 1897, 'une fois de plus, votre adversaire se dérobe dès que la question théorique se pose. Il y a là une véritable masque d'impuissance.'³² But in fact Lampecht's critics had a good deal of *puissance*, which derived not from their ideas or intellects but from their location within the most professionalized structure in Europe. Lamprecht never recovered, even when he became an apologist for the aggressive Wilhelmine state in 1914. He remained an isolated and bitter figure who had championed 'science' of one kind only to be defeated by a different understanding of 'historical science' – one that turned on conventions established in the second half of the nineteenth century and which pretended to hold out the promise of historical truth rather than the manipulation of arbitrary 'theories'. Lamprecht's perceptive biographer records the situation in sad but accurate resignation:

Of the *Methodenstreit* it suffices here to note that Lamprecht's ambitions foundered on constraints that were stronger than he. These took the form of historiographical traditions and conventions of argument that were tenaciously defended by men who, although they were less imaginative than Lamprecht, were far more adept at moving within the established boundaries of the profession, where the issue was ultimately decided.³³

Or so it seemed to those whose eyes had focused on the *Lampechtstreit* rather than the wider picture. Not only did the issues raised after 1891 continue to ripple outwards in the historical profession, but one theme dominating those issues – that of the relation of individual and society as subjects of historical investigation – also proved of permanent significance because of its later treatment by one of the most powerful minds produced in the human sciences in the last two centuries.

We have to move south-west, from Leipzig to Freiburg. There the theoretical problem posed by trying to encapsulate individual human action within a conceptual framework deeply exercised the philosopher Heinrich Rickert who had come to believe that individuals, conceived as random agents, would always escape the compass of any concept, however sophisticated. He reacted against the individualist psychology of the Berlin philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey who sought to construct a process of empathetic communication or *Einfühlung* between historical individuals and the investigating historian.³⁴ But he reacted no less strongly against trying to subsume the vagaries of individual actors with all their randomness and irrational purposes under the categories of a conceptual scheme. Instead he sought a redefinition of 'individuality' in the style of Lacombe and tried to produce a conceptual basis for enquiry in the human sciences. The result was hardly a best-seller and it is a reasonable guess that most historians never looked at it. *Die Grenzen der Naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung* (1902), or *The Limits of Forming Scientific Concepts*, had its own significance all the same, partly for its thesis but more so for the discussions of its theme that Rickert conducted with a colleague who was almost his exact contemporary, an economist with a compelling historical mind that nursed the ambition of achieving conceptual schemata that would take him beyond Rickert. His name was Max Weber.³⁵

Reluctantly at first, but then with increasing conviction, Weber came to accept the force of Rickert's objection to an unproblematic history of individual action while sharing his sense that history must operate both conceptually at some level yet with a purchase on contingent behaviour. The mental space between these two convictions became the domain within which Weber's mature thought expressed itself, leading eventually to his master-work *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* [*Economy and Society*] but also to his most important venture in applying concepts to a specific historical problem

in his famous essay on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.³⁶ Neither Rickert nor Weber had played a direct role in the *Methodenstreit* but they took its message forward and produced a synthesis that would prove of lasting importance within the theory of historical study. The crude notion found in Buckle or Villari or Lacombe that individual behaviour could be rendered explicable in nomothetic statements Weber firmly rejected. Instead he sought to create a new category of concepts that he called, following the phraseology of the German jurist and sociologist Georg Jellinek, an 'ideal type'. 'Ideal' in this formulation did not correspond to a sense of best-possible; rather, it reflected a German emphasis on ideality as a world of mental constructs. The ideal type did not exist in the world as a demonstrable thing: in Weber's own dialect it had the nature of a *ratio cognoscendi* as opposed to that of a *ratio essendi*. It arose in the mind of the historian after an immersion in empirical evidence, not as an explanation of the evidence but as a form of classification from which the deviations of individual instances could be read as significant. If an ideal type did not subsume all items of historical knowledge, neither could any piece of that knowledge in itself disprove the ideal type. It was thus a style of concept-formation that side-stepped the difficulty that Rickert had identified many years before since its point often lay precisely in identifying instances which did *not* fit the typology in order to move towards a better-structured account of causation in an historical problem. It functioned as a control-mechanism which responded to what he called 'the basic duty of scientific self-control'.³⁷ So an ideal type had to be understood, Weber said, as 'an ideal limiting concept with which the real situation, or action, is compared,' rather than as a description of the reality itself; and it would show, not what had to happen or what actually happened, but rather 'what course human action of a certain kind *would* take if it were strictly purposive – rationally oriented, undisturbed by error or emotions,

and if, furthermore, it were unambiguously oriented towards one single, especially an economic, purpose'.³⁸

'Economic' deserves its stress as a qualifier of Weber's historical theory because the ideal type inevitably brings to mind thoughts of economic 'models' and the often dubious accounts of 'economic man' that have arisen from them. What rescued Weber's conception was its relation to empirical investigation and its celebration of the Type as a suggestive instrument rather than a lowest common denominator of reality. He wanted to produce a 'pattern', certainly; he accepted an element of 'rationalization'. Both ambitions, however, had to take their subordinate place in a schema that sought 'observed deviations' from that 'ideal typical construction of rational action'.³⁹ Here was a view of the subject that had none of *a priorism* that historians saw in Lamprecht. It becomes noticeable, indeed, that the disciples of Ranke who had eviscerated the Leipzig historian found much to admire in Weber. The same Friedrich Meinecke who had played so negative a role in the *Methodenstreit* expressed warm views about him. Otto Hintze, another critic of Lamprecht, went on to deploy some of Weber's methodology in his own work on European constitutional history.⁴⁰ To write off the *Methodenstreit* as a minor quibble among historians misses the point, therefore, in a major way. Once we move away from the idea that the issues concerned only Germany (and then only between 1891 and 1898) it becomes plain that the turn to science involved more than a reduction of history to scientific method along the lines pioneered by writers over-fascinated by Darwin. But what *kind* of science? The availability by 1914 of a sophisticated sense of 'scientific' enquiry with a conceptual essence may lead one to expect that historians would espouse it. The historical problem consists in explaining why they did not.

Professionalization, we saw at the outset of this discussion, brought its own view of science, one that sat awkwardly with the recommendations of its more radical members who

wanted to move toward an explicitly 'scientific' method. It is hard to turn a profession towards science when it believes itself already to have turned. It is especially hard when professional orthodoxy hardens into a view that it, and it alone, embodies a scientific methodology appropriate to its subject matter. One reason why the German crisis over method seems so significant in retrospect lies among the arguments provided by the *opponents* of change. Meinecke, von Below, Finke, Lenz all had detailed criticisms to make of Lamprecht but the primary one concerned his failure to understand that history already had its own conception of scientific method – the one pioneered by their master, Leopold von Ranke. As von Below put it at the end of an 80-page thrashing, Lamprecht's system was right only in the parts that were not new. The bits that were genuinely new were also completely wrong.⁴¹ History, that is to say, had become a form of culturally acceptable historical science; it had become 'technical'; it had learned to require 'training'; it celebrated its professors who were now 'experts'. Each issue of the *Historische Zeitschrift* or *Revue Historique* or the *English Historical Review* or *American Historical Review* breathed a confidence that the subject had moved on from romantic narratives in the direction of 'analysis' and 'research' – terms drawn from the discourse of natural science. Rather than helping that process forward, a sympathy with Lamprecht's social psychology or Durkheim's sociology, or Frazer's anthropology threatened to retard and redirect it. Of course there were important dissenting voices. No one in Paris could glance at Berr's *Revue de Synthèse* without sensing the excitement of conceiving the human sciences as interpenetrative.⁴² It was another matter to expect professional historians to envisage being penetrated. When some of these ideas reached the American Historical Association in 1903, the record of the proceedings showed, among the abuse, an alarmed coterie anxiously resisting the tide.⁴³ Despite the imagination of James Harvey Robinson and his colleagues in fomenting a 'new history',⁴⁴ the old retained

its grip through a professional cadre now raised in American graduate schools. In England the serenity remained mostly unbroken. This complacency, for such it was, owed much to *not* experiencing a *Methodenstreit* outside the new field of economics. When one professor with European inclinations tried to tell the Oxford History Faculty to move in the direction of undergraduate research and compulsory dissertations, on the lines that Tout had introduced at Manchester University, he not only failed but was also made to apologise to the Faculty for implying criticism of their methods.⁴⁵ Oxford thus joined hands with Berlin and Baltimore in promoting a conception of history and its young audience to which only a professional guild could effectively minister.

The guild rejected theory while simultaneously embodying one. Essentially, it rested on a view of what knowledge amounted to and a certainty that the gaining of that knowledge formed the purpose historical teaching and study. Valuable knowledge resided in certain areas of discussion: constitutional history, the history of the state and statesmanship, the history of religion and the military history that so often showed how things turned out the way they did. Knowledge of this kind was available, its proponents said, and accessible. It could be disseminated through general textbooks that covered a wide period and include a ballast of relevant 'facts' which the historian had 'discovered'. And it was available in the first place – the fundamental assumption – because the world was roughly how it seemed when investigated empirically. It did not hide behind a veil; there was no sense of concealment. Truth was visible to the naked eye or, if that failed, to the microscope or telescope. What got in the way of it was blindness. Sometimes the blindness acted as a screen for stupidity: you had to be bright, or at least attentive, to do history. More often it had a willful character that could be expressed in a word that typified this epistemological model. It suggested 'bias'. Once introduced into historical thought through a version of 'common sense'

philosophy, this devastating term and its antonym 'objectivity' formed the minds of young people as it still does a hundred years later. Historians learned and taught that knowledge was available and accessible so long as they did not fall victim to 'bias' and remained 'objective' in their work. All preconceptions must be set aside; all value-judgments must be suspended; politics and religion should be shuffled-off at the study door. Historians took down from the hook at the back of that door the white coat of science that would clothe their history as completely as it clothed their body.

A second feature followed from the first. History could not emerge from ideas, concepts, theories, hypotheses, questions. These obviously carried the stains of those very preconceptions from which the subject needed to free itself: they bore the marks of an author when the exercise recommended, as Ranke had indeed taught, that the author should 'dissolve' at the desk. So an 'objective' history had to begin elsewhere with things that existed in the real world and on which everybody could focus scientific attention. Thus began the notion that history began with the 'evidence' and that the evidence lay in the past among the 'sources'.⁴⁶ This move further cemented professional solidarity and self-regard because only those students trained in *Quellenkritik*, or source-criticism, could hope to make sense of a very technical and demanding subject. Good German would come into play even in the study of modern periods of history. (French was assumed.) For all previous periods Latin and perhaps Greek or Hebrew would prove a *sine qua non* for serious analysts. Historians could thus hold up their heads when they entered Faculty meetings with the scientists whose fields – biology, chemistry, physics, cosmology – now exploded with significant and 'objective' conclusions. Perhaps that was the point.

Whatever its rationale, an intra-professional theory buttressed the rising cadre of historians in the universities of the West in the first half of the twentieth century, blocking serious

intrusions from more radical (and often better-grounded) persuasions. Interesting challenges emerged, as they always will among intelligent people. The *Annales* School in France, with its exciting research agendas and attempts to overturn epistemological premises, made some headway into the Parisian establishment after 1930 and became itself hegemonic after 1950. In America during the Depression, Carl Becker and Charles Beard tried, with less success, to pull the American Historical Association towards a more sceptical account of historical factuality.⁴⁷ British historical thought would have received a shot in the arm during the same years, had it not missed, from the astringencies of Robin Collingwood and Michael Oakshott. Italian, German and Iberian historians had problems of their own and saw their subject bent into the opposite of objectivity by Fascist and Nazi rednecks. Standing back from all these complications, an observer of 'science' in its many forms and dialects sees perhaps two epochs in the ongoing argument after 1870. The first, running to about 1960 or 1970, displayed a preoccupation with prophylactics against science unless it took the form that the professional class of historians deemed congruent with an objectivity/bias model of the subject. The second, dating from the 1960s but distorted in its responses by the 'linguistic turn' and its consequences, has espoused science of the kind that radical spirits before the First World War identified as important to understanding the past – anthropology, sociology, global perspectives. That adoption has produced a theoretical subject in the place where once historians thought they had control over an empirical one. Many of the theories have turned out, in their turn, to be weird, unworkable or dead ends. But at least the subject has now shed the false dignity of imagining itself a repository of unshakable truth-claims resting on crystalline 'facts'. In shedding it, moreover, historians have not merely arranged their lives in a better relationship with science; they have also come to terms, arguably for the first time in this

complicated relationship, with what scientists themselves believe scientific work to involve. The real turn to science has followed from turning a face towards those questions, hypotheses and reflections to which historians were once wont only to turn a blind eye.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880–1918* (1983).
- 2 The use of 'men' is, of course, deliberate. Only after the turn of the century did women begin in any numbers to follow the same paths. For the context of this issue see Bonnie G. Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women and Historical Practice* (Cambridge, MA, 1998).
- 3 See William R. Keylor, *Academy and Community: The Foundation of the French Historical Profession* (Cambridge, MA, 1975). For the German profession over a similar period, see Wolfgang Weber, *Priester der Klio: Historisch-sozialwissenschaftliche Studien zur Herkunft und Karriere deutscher Historiker und zur Geschichte der Geschichtswissenschaft 1800–1970* (Frankfurt am Main, 1984).
- 4 Peter Slee, *Learning and a Liberal Education: The study of Modern History at the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Manchester* (Manchester, 1986); Reba Soffer, *Discipline and Power: The University, History and the Making of an English Elite 1870–1930*; Michael Bentley, 'The organization and dissemination of historical knowledge', in Martin Daunton (ed.), *The Organization of Knowledge in Victorian England* (Oxford, 2005), 173–98.
- 5 See M. Bentley, *Modernizing England's Past: English Historiography in the Age of Modernism 1870–1970* (Cambridge, 2005), esp. 92–116.
- 6 'Nothing could be more scientific,' writes one of his students, 'than his detached and objective style.' Douglas Johnson, Guizot: *Aspects of French History 1787–1874* (1963), 327.
- 7 T.H. Buckle, *The History of Civilization in England*, 2nd edn (Vol. 1, 1858), 6.
- 8 Lord Acton in *The Rambler* (1858), printed in Acton, *Essays on the Liberal Interpretation of History: Selected Papers*, ed. W.H. McNeill (Chicago, IL, 1967), 3–21 at 18.
- 9 *La Storia è una Scienza?* (1894), reprinted in English translation in *Studies: Historical and Critical* (1907), 4–5.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 45.
- 11 B. Croce, *What is Living and What is Dead of the Philosophy of Hegel?* (trans. Douglas Ainslie, 1915).
- 12 Antonio Labriola, *La Concezione Materialistica della Storia* (Bari, 1942).
- 13 For the intellectual currents surrounding Villari in these years see Fulvio Tessitore, 'La storiografia come scienza', *Storia della Storiografia*, 1 (1982), 48–88, esp. 69–75.
- 14 *Is History a Science?*, 108.
- 15 Maria Luisa Cicalese, 'La storia è una scienza? Villari fra positivismo e idealismo', *Rassegna Storica Toscana*, 44 (1998), 91–112.
- 16 Paul Lacombe, *De l'Histoire Considérée Comme Science* (Paris, 1894), viii.
- 17 *Ibid.*, xiii. My translation.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 249. My translation.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 52. My translation.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 53–63, 131–5.
- 21 Georg Iggers, 'The "Methodenstreit" in international perspective. The reorientation of historical studies at the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century', *Storia della Storiografia*, 6 (1984), 21–32 at 26–7.
- 22 See Lutz Raphael's impressive critique of too 'national' a frame for the *Methodenstreit* in an important article, 'Historikerkontroversen im Spannungsfeld zwischen Berufshabitus, Fächerkonkurrenz und sozialen Deutungsmustern: Lamprechtstreit und französischer Methodenstreit der Jahrhundertwende in vergleichender Perspektive', *Historische Zeitschrift*, 251 (1990), 325–63, esp. 327–8.
- 23 For a development of this point, see Michael Maclean, 'German historians and the two cultures', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 49 (1988), 473–94.
- 24 Cf. Manfred Schön, 'Gustav Schmoller and Max Weber', in Wolfgang Mommsen and Jürgen Osterhammel (eds), *Max Weber and his Contemporaries* (1989), 60–61.
- 25 Quoted in Steven Lukes, *Emile Durkheim, His Life and Work: A Historical and Critical Study* (Harmondsworth, 1975), 91. This cosmic utterance was announced in 1887, four years before the appearance of Lamprecht's infamous first volume of the German history.
- 26 This was the origin of Pirenne's renowned *Histoire de Belgique* (Brussels, 7 vols., 1900–32).
- 27 See Hans Schleier, 'Karl Lamprecht als Initiator einer intensivierten Forschung über die Geschichte der Geschichtsschreibung', *Storia della Storiografia*, 2 (1982), 38–56, esp. 40–41.
- 28 Wilhelm Windelband (1848–1915), Professor at Strasbourg (German after 1871) from 1882 to 1903 and then at Heidelberg.
- 29 *Alte und neue Richtungen in der Geschichtswissenschaft* (Berlin, 1896)
- 30 For a detailed discussion of the responses see Karl Metz, 'Der Methodenstreit in der deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft: Bemerkungen zum sozialen Kontext wissenschaftlicher Auseinandersetzungen', *Storia della Storiografia*, 6 (1984), 3–19.
- 31 'It seems to me that the author has understood neither your objective nor your method and the spears that he throws fall short of reaching you.' Pirenne to Lamprecht, 19 Feb. 1896, in Bryce Lyon, 'The letters of Henri Pirenne to Karl Lamprecht (1894–1915)', in *Bulletin de la Commission Royale d'Histoire*, 132 (1966), 161–231 at 196.
- 32 'Once more your opponent runs away as soon as the question of theory arises. In that there is a true concealment of weakness.' Pirenne to Lamprecht, 31 Jan. 1897, *ibid.*, 206.

- 33 Roger Chickering, 'Young Lamprecht', *History and Theory*, 28 (1989), 210; and the same author's magisterial biography, *Karl Lamprecht: A German Academic Life 1856–1915* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1993).
- 34 For Dilthey's vision of the historical process see in particular *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences* (ed. A. Makkreel and F. Rodi). Selected Works, Vol. 3 (Princeton, NJ, 2002).
- 35 Max Weber (1864–1920). Raised in Berlin where his father was a lawyer and National Liberal Deputy. Studied at Heidelberg, Berlin and Göttingen; doctorate in medieval commercial law. Professor of Economics at Freiburg, then Heidelberg. But his health was always fragile. Private scholar and statesman until appointed Professor of Economics at Munich in the year before his death.
- 36 Originally published serially in 1904–5. The English translation was produced by Talcott Parsons with an introduction by R.H. Tawney (London, 1930). It is worth recalling that *Geist* had quotation marks around it in the original.
- 37 The 'elementare Pflicht der wissenschaftlichen Selbstkontrolle'. Quoted in Jürgen Kocka, 'Zwischen Elfenbeinturm und Praxisbezug: Max Weber und die "Objectivität" der Kulturwissenschaften', in Christian Gneuss and Jürgen Kocka (eds.), *Max Weber: Ein Symposium* (Munich, 1998), 189.
- 38 Weber, *Economy and Society*, quoted in W.J. Cahnman and A. Boskoff (eds.), *Sociology and History: Theory and Research* (New York, 1964), 116.
- 39 The phrases are Weber's, quoted in Leonard Krieger, *Time's Reasons: Philosophies of History Old and New* (Chicago, IL, 1989), 127–8.
- 40 For these and other illustrations, see W.J. Mommsen and J. Osterhammel (eds.), *Max Weber and his Contemporaries* (2006), 2–4.
- 41 Georg von Below, 'Die neue historische Methode', *Historische Zeitschrift*, 45 (1898), 193–273.
- 42 For an introduction see Peter Burke, *French Historical Revolution: The Annales School 1929–89* and a more critical account in François Dosse, *Histoire en Miettes: Des 'Annales' à la 'Nouvelle Histoire'* (Paris, 1987).
- 43 See the report printed in the *American Historical Review*, 9 (1903–4), 437–55, esp. 448–50.
- 44 James Harvey Robinson, *The New History: Essays Illustrating the Modern Historical Outlook* (New York, 1912).
- 45 See C.H. Firth's infamous inaugural lecture on *The Historical Teaching of History* (Oxford, 1904), which drew a sharp attack from Sir Charles Oman in his own inaugural two years later.
- 46 I have discussed the pervasive consequences of this view in my Wiles Lectures, *Modernizing England's Past*, esp. 5–18.
- 47 Their addresses were printed in the *American Historical Review*, e.g. Carl Becker, 'Everyman his own historian', *AHR*, 37 (1932), 221–36 and C.A. Beard, 'Written history as an act of faith', *AHR*, 39 (1934), 219–31. Beard's more celebrated address called 'That Noble Dream' forms the platform for Peter Novick's compelling account of American historians in *'That Noble Dream': The 'Objectivity' Question and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988).