
UNIT 12 POSITIVIST TRADITION

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12.1 INTRODUCTION

What we commonly understand as the positivist view of history derives basically from three traditions :

- a) The Positivist Philosophy enunciated by the French thinker Auguste Comte;
- b) The Empiricist Tradition which had a long history but was most deeply entrenched in the British philosophical and historical tradition; and
- c) The tradition of history-writing which followed the guidelines laid down by the German historian Leopold von Ranke.

These three traditions fused in various mixtures to produce, what E.H.Carr calls, ‘the commonsense view of history’. At philosophical level, these traditions cannot be said to be one. In fact, there are many contradictions between them. Sometimes, these contradictions, as between Positivism and Empiricism, may be seemingly opposed to each other. For example, while Positivism enunciated universalistic principles, general laws and had a teleological view of history, Empiricism doubted the grand theoretical schemes and relied on sense impressions and the knowledge gained from that. Nevertheless, in the sphere of history-writing, they have been used interchangeably, both by their followers and critics. In this Unit we will discuss all the three trends separately as well as their combined impact on the writing of history. Let us start with the Positivist philosophy.

12.2 AUGUSTE COMTE AND THE POSITIVIST PHILOSOPHY

Auguste Comte (1798-1857), a French thinker, enunciated the Positivist Philosophy. He followed the Enlightenment tradition which believed in universalism. The Enlightenment thinkers believed that what was applicable to one society was valid for all the others. They, therefore, thought that it was possible to formulate universal laws which would be valid for the whole world. Comte also favoured this universal principle and was opposed to individualism which the Romanticists were preaching. Comte was a disciple of Henri Saint-Simon (1760-1825), a utopian socialist, from 1814 to 1824.

Apart from Saint-Simon, the other influences on him were those of John Locke (1632-1704), David Hume (1711-1776) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). All these influences went into the making of his own system of philosophy. The main books he published were titled : *The Course of Positive Philosophy* and *The Course of Positive Politics*. It is in the first book, published in six volumes from 1830 to 1842, that he elaborated his theoretical model about history.

According to Comte, there was a successive progression of all conceptions and knowledge through three stages. These stages are in chronological sequence : ‘the Theological or fictitious; the Metaphysical or abstract; and the scientific or Positive’. Of these three stages the first one is the primary stage through which the human mind must necessarily pass. The second stage is transitional, and the third stage is the final and the ‘fixed and definite state’ of human understanding.

Comte also sees a parallel between this evolution of thought in history and the development of an individual from childhood to adulthood. According to him, the first two stages were now past while the third stage, that is, the Positive stage, was emergent.

Comte considered that the Positive stage was dominated by science and industry. In this age the scientists have replaced the theologians and the priests, and the industrialists, including traders, managers and financiers, have replaced the warriors. Comte believed in the absolute primacy of science. In the Positive stage, there is a search for the laws of various phenomena. ‘Reasoning and observation’, Comte said, ‘are the means of this knowledge.’ Ultimately, all isolated phenomena and events are to be related to certain general laws. For Comte, the Positivist system would attain perfection if it could ‘represent all phenomena as particular aspects of a single general fact; such as gravitation, for instance’.

Positivism, therefore, upheld that knowledge could be generated through observation. In this respect, Positivism had very close resemblance to the Empiricist tradition which emphasised the role of sense experience. Thus observation and experience were considered as the most important and essential function. Facts were the outcome of this process. However, at its most fundamental level, the Positivist philosophy was not concerned with individual facts. They, instead, believed in general laws. These laws were to be derived through the method of induction, that is, by first determining the facts through observation and experience and then derive laws through commonness among them. For Positivists, therefore, general laws are only colligation of facts derived from sense experience. Thus, facts are determined by sense experience and then tested by experiments which ultimately leads to the formation of general laws. These general laws, like those in the sciences, would be related to the basic laws of human development. Once discovered (and formulated), these laws could be used to predict and modify the patterns of development in society. In such a scheme, individual facts, or humans for that matter, were of no consequence. Comte, therefore, looked down upon the historians as mere collectors of facts which were of no relevance to him once general laws were known.

There were three major presuppositions in Comte’s system of philosophy :

- 1) He envisaged that the industrial society, which Western Europe had pioneered, was the model of the future society all over the world.
- 2) He believed that scientific thinking, which he called the positivist philosophy, was applicable both for the sciences and for the society. Moreover, he thought that this thinking, and by implication the positivist philosophy, would soon become prevalent in the whole world, in all societies.

- 3) Comte believed that the human nature was the same everywhere. It was, therefore, possible to apply the general laws of development, discovered by him, to all societies.

Some of these ideas were common in Comte's age. The belief that the age of religion was over and the age of science and industry had arrived was shared by many.

Comte's main ideas derived from two sources – principle of determinism found in thoughts of Montesquieu (1689-1755), a French political philosopher, and the idea of inevitable progress through certain stages propounded by Condorcet (1743-1794), another French philosopher. Thus Comte's central thesis can be stated in Raymond Aron's words as follows;

'Social phenomena are subject to strict determinism which operates in the form of an inevitable evolution of human societies – an evolution which is itself governed by the progress of the human mind.'

Armed with this principle, Comte strove to find in the human world a basic pattern which would explain everything. Thus, for him, 'a final result of all our historical analysis' would be 'the rational co-ordination of the fundamental sequence of the various events of human history according to a single design'.

The Positivist method, as envisaged by Comte, would consist in the observation of facts and data, their verification through experimentation which would finally lead to the establishment of general laws. This method was to be applied in the sciences as well as in humanities such as sociology, history, etc. And, as in the sciences, the individual had not much role in determining the process of development.

Thus, for the historians, Comte's method could have following implications :

- 1) History, like sciences, is subject to certain general laws which could explain the process of human development.
- 2) Human mind progresses through certain stages which are inevitable for all societies and cultures.
- 3) Individuals cannot change the course of history.
- 4) The inductive method, which Comte believed was applicable in sciences, consisting of observation of facts, experimentation and then formulation of general laws, should be applied in the writing of history as well.

12.3 EMPIRICIST TRADITION

The word 'empiricism' derives from the Greek word 'empeiria' which means 'experience'. In philosophy, it means that all knowledge is based on experience and experience alone is the justification of all knowledge in the world. According to the Empiricists, the knowledge acquired through tradition, speculation, theoretical reasoning or imagination is not the proper form of knowledge. Therefore, the bodies of knowledge derived from religious systems, metaphysical speculations, moral preaching and art and literature are not verifiable and therefore not reliable. The Empiricists believe that the only legitimate form of knowledge is that whose truth can be verified. Both the Empiricists and the Positivists maintain that only the observable world which is perceptible can provide the source of genuine knowledge. They include texts as the physical objects which can form part of the knowledge. They reject the metaphysical, unobservable and unverifiable modes of knowledge.

Empiricism has a long history. In western philosophical tradition, the earliest Empiricists were the Greek sophists who made the concrete things the focus of their enquiries. They did not rely on speculations as did many of other Greek philosophers. Aristotle is also

sometimes considered as the founder of the Empiricist tradition, but he may equally be claimed by other traditions opposed to Empiricism. In medieval Europe, Thomas Aquinas believed in the primacy of senses as the source of knowledge. He said that 'there is nothing in the intellect that is not first in the senses'.

In Britain, there existed a very strong Empiricist tradition. In the 16th century, Francis Bacon believed that an accurate picture of the world could be derived only through the collection of observed data. He tried to base philosophical enquiries on scientific grounds. In the 17th century, John Locke was the leading Empiricist philosopher. The other important Empiricist philosophers in Britain were George Berkeley (1685-1753), David Hume (1711-1776), and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873).

The theories of Empiricism hold that our senses (eyes, ears, nose, etc.) act as mirrors for the things and events in the world. It is on the basis of those impressions that we understand the world and establish connections between things and events. The world in all its particulars corresponds to how we describe it in language. Thus when we say potato, it exactly denotes a particular material thing in nature.

Empiricism can be said to have generated the following ideas:

- 1) The real world as we experience is made of concrete things and events and their properties and relationships.
- 2) Individual experience can be isolated from each other and from its object and from the position of its subject. Thus an experience can be described without reference to the person who experienced it or the circumstances which generated it. In relation to the practice of history, it means that the facts can be separated from the individuals or groups or societies that produced them, and from the researchers who have supposedly uncovered them.
- 3) The person who experiences a particular object should be like a clean slate who is influenced only by the object he/she experiences. His/her earlier experiences and ideological orientation are not important. In terms of history-writing, it means that the historian or the collector of facts should be influenced only by those facts that he /she has collected and not by previously held ideology or beliefs.
- 4) The nature of the world can be derived only through inductive generalisation. All such generalisations, however, should be verified through experiments and can be displaced or corrected by further or different experiences.
- 5) All knowledge consists of facts derived through experiences and experiences alone. Therefore, any claimed knowledge of transcendental world or any metaphysical speculations have no basis in reality.

The historians, according to the Empiricists, should repose their trust in the evidences about the past that are presented for us by the contemporaries through their sense impressions and if historians look at these sources closely, they can present a true picture of the past.

12.4 RANKEAN TRADITION

Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), the nineteenth-century German historian, is generally considered as the founding father of the Empirical historiography. It was with him that a completely new tradition of history-writing started which is still the predominant mode of historiography today. It is true that before Ranke, Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) had established the modern historical scholarship with his monumental book, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, published between 1776 and 1788. He based his book on

available sources and evidences. However, his work, along with those of others, such as Voltaire, Hume, etc., who wrote historical pieces in the 18th century, was seriously wanting in many respects. These deficiencies were mostly due to the nature of historical research in the 18th-century Europe. Those problems may be listed as follows:

- 1) The first was their concern for establishing the universal principles of human and social behaviour. Moreover, they could not analyse the patterns of change and development in society and polity. Except Gibbon, most of the 18th-century historians were not seriously concerned with providing empirical details. There was also a lack of critical acumen among many of the practitioners of history with regard to their sources. Most of them relied completely on the sources and took their accuracy and truth for granted.
- 2) There was also the problem of the non-availability of primary sources and documents. Most of the archives were not open to the scholars. Moreover, most of the rulers practised censorship and did not allow publication of books and accounts which did not agree with their views. In addition, the Catholic Church was still powerful and was able to enforce its own censorship prohibiting the books critical of the Church.
- 3) Another associated problem was the lack of formal teaching of history at the university level. Because of this, the historians often worked as individuals and never as a team. This led to an absence of mutual checks and informed criticism.

By the early 19th century, mostly due to the French Revolution and many political reforms introduced in its wake, it became possible to overcome many of the problems discussed above. This great revolution changed many ideas and concepts about the human nature and society. Now people started to think about change and development in social and individual behaviour. Sources and documents were now more carefully and critically evaluated before deciding on their veracity. The Danish scholar Barthold Georg Niebuhr (1776-1831) is generally considered as the pioneer of this new critical method and the source-based historical research. He used the advanced method of linguistic studies and textual analysis for the study of the sources and writing of his book, *History of Rome*, which was published in 1811-12. Niebuhr had worked in Prussia since 1806 and was appointed in the recently founded University of Berlin. In his lectures on Roman history, he critically examined the sources, especially the work of the classical writer Livy (59 BCE — 17 CE). For this, he used the most advanced philological methods and exposed several weaknesses in Livy's work. Niebuhr thought that such method would bring out the bias in the contemporary sources and would enable the historians to present true state of things. He believed that 'In laying down the pen, we must be able to say in the sight of God, "I have not knowingly nor without earnest investigation written anything which is not true."

Although Niebuhr was a crucial figure in developing method of history-writing, it was Ranke who must be credited with the beginning of the modern historiography. In 1824, he published his first book, *The History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations*. In the Preface of the book, as the statement of his purpose, he wrote the passage which became the foremost justification of empirical historiography:

'To history has been assigned the task of judging the past, of instructing the present for the benefit of the future ages. To such lofty functions this work does not aspire. Its aim is merely to show how it really was.'

The Rankean approach to history-writing can be summarised as follows:

- 1) As is clear from the above-quoted statement, Ranke believed that the past should be understood in its own terms and not those of the present. The attitudes and behaviour

of the people of the past ages should be discerned by the incisive study of that particular period and should not be viewed by the parameters of the historian's own age. In Ranke's opinion, the historian should avoid the present-centric concerns while studying the past and should try to understand what issues were important to the people of the age he/she was studying. This idea of Ranke and the Empirical school introduced the notion of historicity. It meant that past has its own nature which was different from the present. It is the duty of the historian to uncover the spirit of a particular age.

- 2) Ranke was an Empiricist who believed that the knowledge is derived only through the sense experience. And the knowledge of the past can come from the sources which are the objective embodiments of the experiences of the people of that particular period. Thus the historian should rely only on the material available in the sources. The historian should not take recourse to imagination or intuition. Any statement to be made about the past should find reference among the sources.
- 3) But Ranke was also critical towards the sources and did not have blind faith in them. He knew that all sources were not of equal value. He, therefore, advocated the hierarchy of the sources. He gave priority to the sources which were contemporary with the events. These are known as the **primary sources**. Among these, the records produced by the participants or direct observers should be given preference to those written by others in the same period. Then there are the other sources produced by people later on. These are known as the **secondary sources** and should be accorded lesser credence than the primary sources while studying the events. Thus the precise dating of all sources became a matter of prime concern.
- 4) Ranke also emphasised the importance of providing references. This way all the assertions and statements could be supported by giving full details of sources from which they were derived. Here he further refined and elaborated the technique already followed by Gibbon and other historians before him. This practice was important because it provided the opportunity to cross-check the evidences cited by the historians. This would lead to corrections and modifications of the views and interpretations of historians.
- 5) Ranke differentiated between facts and interpretations. He emphasised on the primacy of facts which were supported by the evidences based on the sources. The historians' job is to first establish facts and then interpret them. Thus, in Ranke's opinion, the historian should not look into the sources to confirm his/her hypotheses, but, instead, build his/her hypotheses on the basis of the facts found in the sources.

Ranke's own output was enormous. He wrote several multi-volume books, the best known among them are : *The Ottoman and the Spanish Empires in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, *The Popes of Rome, their Church and State, in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* and *History of Reformation in Germany*. Through his books Ranke tried to set the example for the future historians.

Ranke and his followers not only established the methodology for professional history but also helped in developing the institutions to support it. Ranke started graduate seminars in the University of Berlin in 1833 where young researchers were systematically trained. It created a group of scholars in Germany in the 1840s who were devoted and who were involved in writing professional history. Even before that, in 1823, the Prussian government had started the publication of *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* which strove to publish all important sources for German medieval history for the historians. By now, more than 360 volumes have appeared.

Ranke conceptualised history as a rigorous science which should abstain from metaphysical speculations and value judgments. He further emphasised that the historians must put the sources to philological criticism in order to determine their veracity. In contrast to the Comtean positivism, Ranke stressed the uniqueness of the events and not their universality. For him, it was important to look for the exact details and not for the general laws. By 1848, all German-speaking universities had adopted the Rankean method for writing history. And after 1870, in most European countries, the United States and Japan, the Rankean model was adopted for historical studies. Journals began to be published in several languages to promote scientific history. Thus the journal *Historische Zeitschrift* began publication in German in 1859. It was a trend-setter. It was followed by *Revue Historique* in French in 1876, *Rivista Storica Italiana* in Italian in 1884, the *English Historical Review* in 1886, the *American Historical Review* in 1895 and several similar journals in many languages and countries.

12.5 POSITIVIST/EMPIRICIST VIEW OF HISTORY

Despite their differences, what all these traditions shared became crucial for the development of historiography. Firstly, they all maintained that history (along with sociology, politics and economics) was a science and similar methods of research and investigation might be applied in both areas. Secondly, history dealt with reality and facts which existed outside and independent of the perception of the historians. Thirdly, history moved in more or less linear sequence in which events followed the earlier ones in linear chronological time.

Some of the hard-core Positivist historians were Numa-Denis Fustel de Coulanges and Hippolyte Taine in France and Henry Thomas Buckle in England. Coulanges asserted that what could not be perceived did not exist. Hippolyte Taine, in his book *Les Origines de la France Contemporaine* (1874-93), attempted to explain history as ‘geometry of forces’. Buckle, in his *History of Civilisation in England* (1857-61), tried to explain English history in terms of such factors such as climate, geography and innate psychology.

The contribution of such historians to the mainstream historical tradition has been rather limited. It is the Rankean and Empiricist traditions which have proved crucial to the development of historiography. Theodor Mommsen (1817-1903), the great German historian was a follower of Ranke. He became famous for his classic *Roman History* written in 3 volumes. This book was a prime example of his meticulous scholarship. He wrote about the history of Roman republic from its inception to its fall by using numismatic, philological and epigraphic sources. His other writings were *Provinces of the Roman Empire from Caesar to Diocletian*, and the *Roman Public Law* and he edited the *Corpus of Latin Inscriptions*.

Lord Acton (1834-1902) was another major figure in this tradition. His most lasting contribution was the editorship of the first edition of the *Cambridge Modern History*. Acton believed that in near future when all the facts would be accessible it was possible to write ‘ultimate history’. He instructed the contributors to volume to ‘meet the demand for completeness and certainty’. He wrote to them :

‘Contributors will understand that our Waterloo must be one that satisfies French and English, German and Dutch alike; that nobody can tell, without examining the list of authors, where the Bishop of Oxford laid down the pen and whether Fairburn or Gasquet, Libermann or Harrison took it up.’

J.B.Bury (1861-1927) was another important English historian in this tradition. He also firmly believed in the scientific status of history and exhorted the historians to be accurate, erudite and exact in their search and presentation of facts. He maintained that although

history may provide material for writing literature or philosophy, it was different from both these because it was a science. He wrote many important historical works including the *History of Greece* and *A History of the Later Roman Empire*.

This view of history was summarised by an immensely influential textbook entitled *Introduction to the Study of History* written by C.V. Langlois and Charles Seignobos, published in 1898. The authors declared that the objective of history-writing was ‘not to please, nor to give practical maxims of conduct, nor to arouse emotions, but knowledge pure and simple’.

Even though there were many critics of this view, this tradition dominated in the 19th century and even in the 20th century most of the professional history followed this trend. Most historians believe in its central premises that facts have a separate and independent existence and that most of our knowledge of the physical world ultimately derives from sense impressions.

12.6 CRITIQUES

There has been widespread criticism of the positivist and empiricist views of history. Right since the Rankean era there have been historians who criticised this trend of history-writing. Johan Gustav Droysen (1808-1884), professor of History at Berlin from 1859 to 1884, described the objective approach of Ranke as ‘the objectivity of a eunuch’. The work of Jacob Burckhardt (1818-97), Professor of History at Basle from 1845, provided an alternative approach to that of Ranke. He was a disciple of Ranke, but reacted against his method of history-writing and followed the approach of Augustin Thierry (1795-1856) and Jules Michelet (1798-1874). Thierry and Michelet criticised the straightforward empiricism and gave rise to ideas which are associated with the school of ‘historical romanticism’. This trend of historiography stressed the points which the Rankean and Positivist schools had rejected. The historians associated with this trend emphasised the importance of historian’s intervention in the writing of history. They believed that the historian should be passionate and committed rather than detached. They also emphasised the moral side of history-writing in opposition to rational approach. The local and the particular were given more importance as against universal and general. The history of the community as a whole was emphasised as against the approach which gave prominence to the leaders. As Thierry said that his aim in writing history was to ‘envisage the destiny of peoples and not of certain famous men, to present the adventures of social life and not those of the individual’. This school believed in the importance of literary skills in the writing of history and stressed that history was as much art as it was science. They criticised empiricism for its cult of sources and its emphasis on neutral interpretation. They, in its place, stressed the role of sentiments and feelings in history-writing.

Although there were many historians even before 1914 who seriously questioned the possibility of a scientific, neutral and value-free history, the events of the First World War and their aftermath severely jolted the belief that historical accounts could be produced which would satisfy persons of all nationalities. In fact, the historians of many countries wrote histories which contradicted the ones written by those in other countries. They interpreted events which justified their respective nations. Even though there were exceptions to this rule, the overall tendency was to write nationalist histories rather than ‘scientific’ histories. In fact, the nationalist histories were flaunted as scientific histories. The Rankean and Positivist ideals of producing ‘scientific’ and ‘objective’ history came under severe strain.

The Positivists believed in the methods and ‘truths’ of the natural sciences. They wanted to apply these methods to the study of society as well. Hence, they designated these

disciplines as social sciences. They believed that, by the use of inductive methods, it was possible to predict about the future of society as in the natural sciences. But in the 20th century, the nature of the natural sciences also changed at theoretical level. Albert Einstein's **General Theory of Relativity**, propounded in 1913, changed the very nature of research in natural sciences.

The thinking about history was also influenced by these developments. The Positivist certainty and Rankean objectivity now seemed a thing of the past. Many thinkers now emphasised the relativistic nature of history. Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) in Germany, Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) in Italy and R.G. Collingwood (1889-1943) in England were among the more influential thinkers in this regard. Croce declared that 'All history is contemporary history' which meant that history is written always in the light of the present concern and is shaped by the ideological tool available to the historian in his/her own era. The American historian, Carl Becker, denied the existence of facts at all by saying that 'the facts of history do not exist for any historian till he creates them'. Collingwood went even further by provocatively stating that 'all history is the history of thought'. What these thinkers were challenging was the usual distinction between fact and interpretation which most of the pre-First World War historians were prone to do.

Their views received wide acceptance among historians. The role of the historian now acquired huge prominence, as the role of sources had early on. The work of interpretation was always considered the prerogative of the historian. But now even the decision about what should be considered as facts was thought to be the privilege of the historian. As E.H.Carr states that 'the necessity to establish these basic facts rests not on any quality of the facts themselves, but on *a priori* decision of the historian'. The facts no longer spoke for themselves, as was the case with the empiricists; they now have to be made to speak in the diction of the historian. To quote E.H.Carr again :

'The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context. . . . a fact is like a sack — it won't stand up till you've put something in it.'

E.H.Carr presents these views as the Collingwood view of history. He himself adopts a more cautious approach which gives equal weightage to facts and historians. Most of the working historians generally adopt this approach.

12.7 SUMMARY

In this Unit we have attempted to familiarise you with the Positivist tradition of history-writing. This tradition is, in fact, constituted by three different traditions of thought — the Positivist philosophy enunciated by August Comte, the tradition of history-writing started by Leopold von Ranke and the Empiricist tradition predominant in Britain. The interaction of these three traditions tried to put the practice of history on a scientific basis. This tradition claimed that the sources were all-important, that the facts existed independent of the historian, that neutrality is a desired goal, that total objectivity is possible in the writing of history and that history can be considered as science. This view of history was criticised even during the 19th century by historians like Burckhardt and philosophers like Wilhelm Dilthey. However, more serious challenge came in the beginning of the 20th century. Thinkers like Croce, Carl Becker and Collingwood questioned the very foundations of such an approach of scientificity, neutrality and objectivity. They denied the existence of facts independent of the historian and gave overwhelming importance to interpretation in history-writing. Such views of total relativism were also not helpful to most practicing historians who tried to adopt a more balanced view which accorded even importance both to the facts and the historians.

12.8 EXERCISES

- 1) What are the differences and similarities between Positivism and Empiricism?
- 2) Who was Leopold von Ranke? Discuss his views on history.
- 3) Discuss the positive and negative points of Rankean view of history.

12.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

E.H.Carr, *What is History?* (Harmondsworth, New York, Penguin, 1977 (1961))

C.Behan McCullagh, *The Truth of History* (London, New York, Routledge, 1998)

C.Behan McCullagh, *The Logic of History* (London, New York, Routledge, 2004)

Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History* (New York, Palgrave, 1989 (1970))

Stephen Davies, *Empiricism and History* (New York, Palgrave, 2003)

Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought – I* (London, New York, Penguin, 1965)

Maurice Mandelbaum, *History, Man and Reason* (Baltimore and London, The John Hopkins Press, 1971)

Kenneth Thompson and Jeremy Tunstall (eds.), *Sociological Perspectives* (Harmondsworth, New York, Penguin, 1984(1971))