


## Changing Methodologies in Historicism: An Analysis for Rise and Fall of Rankean Historiography

### *Tarihçilikte Değişen Metodolojiler: Ranke Tarihçiliğinin Yükselişi ve Düşüşünün Bir Analizi*

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**Abstract:** Leopold von Ranke is a revolutionary historian who made a massive impact on history writing by promoting empiricism, objectivity, and reliance on state archives in the 19th century. Still, his methodology was challenged by newcomer historians of the 20th century in terms of subjectivity and suspicion. As the new century witnessed many political, economic, and cultural changes, the generation raised in the mid-20th century matured their historical approach in parallel with these changes. Revision is one of the formal prerequisites for history writing, which allowed both Ranke and the historians of the mid-20th century to develop their methods for their generations. As anything born, live, and die, Rankean historical methodology got its share, naturally.

**Keywords:** Leopold von Ranke, historiography, empiricism, objectivity, subjectivity.



The only thing that never changes is to change itself. While the change is continuous, nothing can challenge it. People, ideas, and methods need to be defeated by time, even the greatest ones. Thousands of shining stars of their eras lost their credibility in centuries, and many theories are forgotten in the dusty pages of history. Ironically, even historians and their methodologies shared the same fate with these people. A revolutionary figure of 19th-century historicism, Leopold von Ranke had his share after a century, as well.

For many centuries historians seek different approaches to construct their historical narratives. As time and centuries advanced, historians' methods evolved with that advancements; however, the search for perfection has never ended. The romanticism of the ancient era evolved into empiricism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Empiricism was challenged by idealism and cynicism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. All these approaches were valuable for their ages; however, as Francis Fukuyama recently confessed that history has not ended as he predicted in the 1990s yet nor the evolution of historical narrative (The Atlantic, 2014). In fact, the progress in the technology of millennium allowed the increment in a variety of sources, eased accession to them, which paved the way for a new era for the historicism. This variety and might to access evidence may revive objectivity discussions once more or bring a more critical approach due to the increment in information pollution. In any case, this situation is perfectly normal rather than being concerning because the only thing that can be sure about is, they are going to bring change to the methods and historical approaches.

History has been and still is an attempt to understand the past, specifically the people, societies, and events (Carr, 1961, p. 10-11). While constructing a historical narrative, a historian cannot provide specific knowledge about his/her topic; however, he/she can interpret courses of events in the light of sources. Indeed, this is all a historian can do. On the contrary to the historical narratives, courses events have no limits. They are connected with full of infinite details, which preclude theorization of methods and excludes history from positive sciences. In such a complicated struggle, many historians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century admitted the fact that any knowledge on a particular topic would be incomplete due to the nat-



ural limits. For instance, historian Robin George Collingwood defines historical narrative construction of events by advocating historical imagination and existing sources (1993, p. 301). This imagination also explains the doubt and uncertainty factors of history writing and their relation with the subjectivity, which promote its most clear distinction from the positive sciences.

This subjective mentality became more apparent with the changes in history writing perspectives thanks to the new wave historians of the late 20th century. Critical authors like C.L.R. James, Edward Said, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, and Keith Jenkins followed ground-breaking historian of 1950s Edward Carr's steps and challenged the empiricism as a valid history writing method. The rise of alternative history writing abandoned winner-produced stereotype historiographies. It did shoulder not only argumentative narratives but also critical thinking perspectives against objectivity and empiricism. Modern historians of the 20th century were mostly critical on these issues; the impossibility of objectivity, empiricism in historical research, and suspiciousness of common history was their common ground. In fact, as choosing sources to be advocated to explain a past event is perfectly normal for Carr (1961, p. 14-15), this perspective also confirms that anybody can produce different historical narratives because objectivity would be dead due to the selection of sources. Then, anybody would have a right to believe or not what is presented as history (PathwaystoPhilosophy, 1999). Even, post-modernist historians like Jenkins furthered that discussion and declared that historical events have already been buried with the ones who have witnessed it. He argues that no methodology would matter to attain full knowledge about what happened in the past (1991, p. 12).

Harsh pessimism of Jenkins can create a disappointing environment for the future of historical methodology and historians, who would pursue an objective truth deduce in their works. However, it should not be. With the rise of alternative histories against official documents allowed the growth of such suspicious environment, but not a threat to historicism. Naturally, change in time brought change in methodology, as well. In fact, this era also meant progress compared to Rankean history writing of 19th century, which promoted reliance on factual-based pieces of evi-



dence would be the only way to write an entirely accurate history (Iggers, 1998, p. 45-46). In fact, what has brought by Leopold von Ranke was also revolutionary for his age. Until the late 19th century, history writing advanced with hearsay methods. Historical studies generally relied on romantic, mostly exaggerated novelistic narratives, and stories until Ranke challenged them (Lovejoy, 1941, p. 269). Drastic political, cultural, and scientific changes of the 19th century also improved the faith in realism in different fields. Ranke, who was a German historian of this period, shined out as the founder of a new, realistic, and professional history writing method in the light of primary sources. Therefore, this paper is going to centralize his rise and fall to analyze sustainability in the evolution of history writing methodology.

Ranke was known as one of the most influential historians who shaped the historical profession in Europe and, eventually, in the United States, in the late 19th century (Breisach, 1995, p. 232). His historical methodology focused on the significance of archival research and analysis of historical documents to form a more accurate and objective history writing. The core of Ranke's method was narrating things as they were, which aimed to liberate history from philosophy and literature while getting it closer to the positive sciences. This divorce from philosophy in history writing was revolutionary in theory. This conception of his task allowed the idea of the development of "scientific" history. It also hepled the rise of history as an academic profession in the 19th century. History, in the Rankean perspective, was evaluated as a complete term in which culture and society have their place with politics. In addition to that, his claim of objectivity rested on the highly metaphysical assumptions of German idealistic philosophy of the 19th century. After Ranke's concrete definition of history and its methodological boundaries shaped by hypotheses, history started to be considered as a branch of positive sciences (Bourne, 1896, p. 385).

In fact, before Ranke, historians used to think and write in the context of their period by regarding the current dominant ideas about how to interpret the past and interpret lessons for their societies. In this context, comprehensiveness of history might not be the prior case, as well as revealing an objective truth. The practice of historical writing was the



belief of historians, which served two elements of neoclassical narrative as individuals and continuity of events (Gossman, 1986, p. 26). Romantic historical narrative underlined the acute sense of the uniqueness and originality of historical phenomena until the mid 19th century. Leading figures of the early 1800s were under the illusion of romanticism, and it is believed that only the state clerks should focus on historical records for their profession. They tend to aim to draw historical romances for his readers inside the authentic atmosphere of the past (Collingwood, 1993, p. 36). In short, heroic figures like Christ, Caesar, or Joan of Arc and their miraculous lives dominated the history writing, and this methodology kept its popularity until the emergence of empiricism movement (Gossman, p. 28). The shocking experience of age of revolutions, as Hobsbawm defined, probably became a contributing factor in sweeping romantic historical narrative from the prior methodology and paved the way for a new generation of historians who denounced the optimistic confidence of their Romantic forebears in the imminent reconciliation of myth and history, poetry and science, people and bourgeoisie, as an illusion.

The roots of historiography coincided with this century, which centered the primary sources on the big picture of history writing. In general, the new aim became the construction of universal history, and Ranke, Oswald Spengler, and Arnold Toynbee set to work integrating primary source-based historicism to write universal narratives (Yerxa, 2009, p. 1). Focusing on facts challenged the a priori construction of history writing. For Ranke, all conclusions should be deduced from the facts. For that purpose, he underlined the significance of primary sources over secondary ones. Modern history writing methodologies until his age considered oral narrative and literary sources as historical evidence; however, they would only deceive historians, who underestimate the firsthand knowledge from the official documents (Benzoni, 1987, p. 20). In this methodology, Ranke put his faith in the records of nation-states and become a leading figure of political history, not surprisingly in an age of nationalism. In this struggle, positivist philosophers and historians of his era, like Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim, sided with Ranke in the discussion of the objectivity. As historical positivism supported the idea that historical evidence requires no interpretation but letting them speak



for themselves (Calhoun et al., 2002, p. 104), positivism, in general, also asserts that valid knowledge can be scientific (Larrain, 1979, p. 197). In addition to them, some postmodern historians, like John Tosh, also state that all historians can offer their vision of the past and perspectives to their readers, understandably, as long as they satisfy scientific methods (1984. p. 176).

Primary sources became significant materials for the historians in their journey to construct an accurate and scientific method in Ranke's age. They also contributed to the objectivity and classification of sources for organizing independent and reliable work. With the increment of accessibility of these sources in the mid-late modern period, historical narratives showed progress to satisfy realistic and scientific demands. Ranke's approach to writing about things as they happened greatly benefited from a variety of sources, as well. Historians tend to visit different archives, cultures, and societies to bring depth to their studies. The reformation or the classical modern revolutions of the Dutch, British, Americans, French, or Russians can be observed throughout differently constructed sources, which also institutionalized universal historicism. Therefore, methodologically relying on primary sources in the age of rationale have crushed weakened romanticism (Koselleck, 2002, p. 52).

The crucial thing about relying on the primary sources is diversifying the aspects, records, and, more significantly, explanations. More evidence means the promotion of a more accurate and realistic account for the cases. For instance, Peter Burke challenges the functionality of the Bayeux Tapestry in explanation of Norman conquest of England after the Battle of Hastings of 1066. He states that this primary source was an essential part of the Norman propaganda machine and commissioned by the victors (2001, p.10). It is not a surprising thing to see that he joined the 20th-century historians, who would reject a Norman-based evaluation of the conquest of Britain that happened nearly millennium ago. Jenkins also underlines that even the primary sources can be seen in the original documents; they are mostly narratives of originals of the case, not the genuine one (p. 57). Geoffrey Elton urges that history writing includes a never-ending search of sources, and there will always be more to be said (1967, p. 129).



These claims are spot-on comments; however, creating a melting pot with sources from Norway, Saxons, and Normans would be revolutionary historiography in the 19th century. In parallel with the age of rationale, history started to be facilitated by the formation of a real discourse of the past. The modern historiography became a dedicated institutional production of such discourse. All events, those are remembered and preserved in some original form, aim to constitute the historical record. One of the most significant tasks of these records turned into accurate contribute to the narrative for the past. Narratives became more detailed. Ranke and his subordinates, followers afterward, argue that history writing methodology cannot be a philosophy that aims to tell stories about the past but explaining the course of events in a "scientific manner" (Breisach, p.1). When Ranke introduced his new empiricism and attempted to explain how the events happened, he shouldered the burden of the past, broke the dominance of romantic historiography, and helped to evolve historiography into a professional one.

The progress of modern history writing in the light of primary sources showed a great promise for its age. This approach has also advanced to a new stage with the variance of primary sources throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The knowledge derived from state documents was increased thanks to works of antipathetic state clerks and state archives. Furthermore, different types of media consolidated the place of first-hand information in organization of better historiographies. However, change of era and variation of primary sources allowed the development of a new history thinking after the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The traumatic events that occurred in the first half of the 20th century damaged the reliability of state and governments. Propaganda activities pumped to the masses by the governments, state-controlled media joined them, and catastrophe in the final created a skeptic/suspicious era in the historical narrative. Jacques Derrida identifies these horrific events by specifically underlining the role of the holocaust to the top of the list. This horrifying incident created a generation who would reject being silent to the acts of governments and stand to write the histories of survivors (Hartman & Budick, 1986, p. 323). For this generation, the question is not even how to speak; but, people have the right to speak and interro-



gate the authority. Nadine Fresco also states that this generation swallowed up the past what has been lived or narrated; therefore, they refused to forget and worked to remind these memoirs to the next generations (1984, p. 419-421).

In addition to them, decolonization of the 1960s raised new historians among the locals of liberated states, who also kicked off new campaigns to write alternative histories besides imperialistic states' sources. They joined the other crusaders of the 1960s, who were the parts of the years' civil rights movements, antiwar movements, and new feminist waves. These changes must have contributed to the changing nature of the historical profession, as well. The growth of the "counterculture" and the generation raised in this period tend to be ambivalent towards political authority and ready to campaign for the topics like racial equality and social justice (Spiegel, 2007, p. 18). Therefore, not surprisingly, their witnessing developed their own historiography, while they were ill-disposed to believe in the authority and its sources. At last, deconstruction, post-structuralism, and postmodernism periods after the post-war period explain that why did this generation's ideas were resonated so powerfully to construct a new universal history narrative in the 1960s and 1970s. In the light of these new scholarships, a new strong feeling emerged as history has ever been a production of the powerful ones (Trouillot, 1995, p. 5-7).

Carr, as a leading figure among them, suspected that any historical scholarship many pumps an elusive story. This illusion would make the specific event a metaphoric jigsaw with the missing parts, which neither can be completed nor trusted. Limitations of the one-sided state documents hamper historians' accounts about defining a historical case because they have to rely on that source. Significantly, this problem complicates studies of ancient times and dark ages when only the limited sources survived. What it is known as the fact of history has been selected by generations of state chroniclers who were professionally occupied in state departments, as well as the theory and practice of powerful ones' directions. Therefore, their records cannot be entirely trusted (p. 14).

Carr was correct in his skepticism towards state-generated primary sources. Hayden White joins his crusade and argues that historical narratives cannot be objective while the writers are subjective (1973, p. 286).





His guidance in this aspect is Hegelian dialectic, which considers philosophy as only an interpretation of what is rational, but it is not real. In this rationality, White defends that accounts of the past were the actual commitments to “had to have happened,” which directly related to philosophical history, not the truth (1973, p. 268). Moreover, beyond rationality discussions, historical knowledge would be failed to be objective when it eventually reaches its limits. Michael Stanford evaluates imperfection of any humanitarian claims and states that no one can be sure about anything that happened in the past (1994, p. 122). The imperfect and incomplete nature of the human obligates historical records to be incomplete.

Similar to the arguments before, skeptics have also challenged the objectivity in a historical case due to the subjectivity of perceptions. In straightforward claims or statements, the truth can be promoted. For instance, the occurrence of a significant event is historically provable; this is a fact. However, explaining how it has happened would always need subjectivity. Any case would be differentiated by the descriptions of witnesses; even any perspectives are primary sources. Therefore, Stanford asks with a suspicion that while this small case can be narrated differently, how a historian can be sure in open-ended matters? (p. 127)

Ranke and other historians of the 19th century singled out factual-based evidence, and primary sources are the key terms to write an entirely accurate history. This approach was revolutionary after a long romanticized period; however, this method was requiring an impossibility because historical writing is inherently subjective. Reliance on primary sources was an essential step towards the explanation of a case, but a historian cannot include every relevant evidence. As Carr underlined, in time, he/she has to choose the most relevant ones after a purely subjective process. Additionally, facts can be beneficial when they are presented in a specific historical context. While doing that, a historian eventually interprets these facts, which enables a biased process once more. In a world with a variety of sources, Ranke's method has to be obsolete because it is prone to be naive as any primary source would be impossible to utilize fully.

Therefore, if Ranke was a groundbreaking historian who revolutionizes history writing in his age, what made him highly critical for the



postmodern historians of the 20th century? What did motivate their investigation of the concept of revision in history? In fact, revision has been at the core of all historiography research, which started with Ranke and his positivism in the first place (Spiegel, p. 2). The empirical historicism of the 19th century arose in opposition to romantic methodology, and this progress centralized science and truth. Similar to Comte, Ranke and other historians believed that historical events should be understood with these significant terms of their age, as well. In light of the new methodology, the historical narrative turned into the human sciences. Inevitably, looking for any evidence to form an objective factual narrative became the central task of a historian. According to Peter Novick, what made history science in these years has the same reasons why many postmodernists no longer share objectivity goals these days. They accept the functionality of the documentary in historical research; however, revision with the progress of technology, evaluation, and mindset is obligatory. Ranke aimed to drive history in the same direction with the development of knowledge and the advancement of society, the most valid terms of his age (1988). Therefore, it can be underlined that products of historians are directly related to their social embeddedness and the protocols of professional practice in the time and place they live in. Any substantial revision in historiography's relation with these terms can be traced by the last several decades and their necessities, desires, and inspirations. It also suggests that history writing cannot be entirely considered without the psychology of individual historians and the features of ages they live in (Althusser, 1968, p. 162). According to Michel de Certeau, modern Western history evolved into the study of the revival of the past rather than focusing on dead facts (1988, p.5). Historians should draw a line between what has already gone and what is not for neglecting dead facts while searching for inherited knowledge about the cases that can be saved. In that sense, the historian's task becomes, reading what was never written rather than narrating things as they were (Agamben, 1999, p. 1). This distinction between old and new historicism gives authority to a historian to write about the absent and producible topics in the same field. It also varies the scope of historical research to grasp every document rather than limited state sources and represents it through its own



productive labor of writing (De Certeau, p. 5-11). Here is that revision in history writing; the supplementation of the historical record to explain what happened, as classical historicism had it, is no longer valid. On the other hand, connection of events with various sources and by being loyal to continuation of history to fill a historical gap becomes significant.

To conclude, Ranke's legacy did not entirely vanish. Historians still construct the objects of their investigation by freeing them from merely fictive narratives. Furthermore, historians also did not reject the former biased primary sources due to their deficits in the name of their trustworthiness. In contemporary historiography, objectivity or absolute truth cannot be satisfied by the scientific approaches; still, in this process, the historical facts are not so much displaced, as well. Only, Ranke's historical thoughts have completed their time as everything does. Especially in the 1950s and 1960s, the development of post-structuralism and skepticism towards the authority raised as a psychological response to the political, economic, and cultural changes in the world. This awareness of the change allows new progress for history writing methods, which strongly reinforced by the ideology of the postcolonial period. The historians of this period centralized concepts as place, variety of sources, and procedure of research with the adoption of post-structuralism and postmodernism's consciousness while rejecting impossible paradigms of older historiography, most notably objectivism. Naturally and conveniently to the period they lived in, they challenged Rankean historiography due to their suspicion towards pure objectivity and the source of the authority. In fact, Ranke, similarly, campaigned against the romantic historians and their methods in the 19th century, when he was a critical, passionate, and progressive historian in his time.

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**Öz:** Leopold von Ranke, 19. yüzyılda ampirizmi, nesnellği ve devlet arşivlerine bağımlılığı teşvik ederek tarih yazımı üzerinde büyük bir etki yapan devrimci bir tarihçidir. Yine de, 20. yüzyılın yeni tarihçileri öznellik ve şüphecilik olgularına dayanarak Ranke'nin metodolojisine meydan okumuşlardır. Yeni yüzyılın birçok siyasi, ekonomik ve kültürel değişikliğe tanık olması nedeniyle, 20. yüzyılın ortalarında ortaya çıkan bu nesil, bu gelişmelere paralel olarak kendi tarihsel yaklaşımlarını olgunlaştırmışlardır. Revizyon, tarih yazımı açısından bir gerekliliktir ve hem Ranke'ye hem de 20. yüzyıl tarihçilerine kendi dönemlerine uygun metodları geliştirmeleri için olanak vermiştir. Her şeyin doğup, yaşayıp, ölmesi gibi Ranke tarihçiliği de doğal olarak bundan payını almıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Leopold von Ranke, tarih yazımı, ampirizm, nesnellik, öznellik.



