1 Historicism and the Human Sciences in Victorian Britain

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The Victorians themselves did not use the word "historicism." In the middle of the nineteenth century, the historian George Grote used the word "historicize" to describe the act of representing something as historic.[1] By the end of the century, the word "historicize" had also been used to describe the act of recounting events historically. It was at this time that the word "historicism" first entered the English language. "Historicism" was a translation of the Italian word "storicisimo," as used by Benedetto Croce, or the German "historismus," as used by Friedrich Meinecke and Ernst Troeltsch.[2] Although these European thinkers openly debated a crisis of historicism, the phrase "crisis of historicism" is misleading. The debate concerned worries about the philosophical and social consequences of too strong an emphasis on the historical nature of human life, but the worries affected people who were themselves historicists. It is arguably more accurate, therefore, to talk of a crisis in historicism. Historicists were worried that their worldview undercut itself, leading to destructive relativism in epistemology and in ethics.

Historicism is a philosophy that emphasizes the importance of history in understanding, explaining, or evaluating phenomena. If that definition seems question-begging, it at least serves to distinguish historicism from history. Historicism is a philosophical worldview that usually applies to human life or to life in general but not to mere matter. History is the study of the past. Historicists need not study the past; instead, they might draw out arguments for historicism from everyday concepts, or they

[1] For a useful guide to the changing use of related words at this time, see J. Murray, ed., *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles: Founded Mainly on the Materials Collected by the Philological Society*, 9 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1844–1933).

[2] C. Rand, "Two Meanings of Historicism in the Writings of Dilthey, Troeltsch, and Meinecke," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 25 (1964), 503–18. For a broader historical discussion see R. Bambach, *Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), and for an alternative discussion of one attempt to retain historicism while avoiding relativism, see J. Cho, "The Crisis of Historicism and Troeltsch's Europeanism," *History of European Ideas* 21 (1995), 195–207.

might discuss the implications that historicism has for other concepts, debates, or practices. Equally, historians need not be historicists; they might explain past events not by reference to historical contexts but by, for example, formal models, mechanisms, or correlations.

A historicist philosophy has been contrasted with reductionism. The historicist stress on the significance of historical contexts certainly distinguishes it from social theories that postulate general and often immutable laws. Historicists are suspicious of the formalism of so much social science, and arguably of the kind of economic determinism associated with Marxism. However, a historicist philosophy has also been contrasted with social theories that present historical change as either random or the product of unfettered agency or free will. Historicism certainly suggests that historical events are, in some sense, products of the circumstances in which they occur. Historicists present historical developments as explicable in terms of those circumstances. Some historicists have postulated a religious or secular logic to historical events, making those events seem not only explicable given the historical context, but also inevitable given the teleological direction of human affairs.

Victorian historicists generally relied on a more or less explicit teleology. The main argument of this book is, indeed, that the Victorian era was the heyday of what might be called "developmental historicism." The Victorians characteristically made sense of human life first by locating actions, events, practices, and institutions in their historical contexts, and second by treating history as a progressive unfolding of principles such as character, sociability, reason, and liberty.

This book traces the rise, extent, content, and decline of developmental historicism in the Victorian era. Each chapter focuses on Victorian thought about a particular topic, such as life, race, language, literature, character, history, political economy, empire, or international law. The chapters focus on topics, rather than modernist disciplines, because that is how the Victorians thought about the world. Victorian learning was not divided into disciplines – political science, economics, sociology – that focused on different empirical domains and that were held together primarily by a shared modernist concept of social science as based on the search for correlations, classifications, and formal models. Rather, Victorian learning tended to pick particular objects, explore facts about them, and then make sense of these facts by locating them in a developmental narrative that covered the whole of human life, perhaps the natural world, and sometimes even the divine.

As each chapter focuses on historicism in the study of a particular topic, I will use this introduction to highlight general themes. I will start by discussing the rise of developmental historicism alongside

romanticism or, perhaps more accurately, a broad organicism. Organicism infused, to varying degrees, each of the three main strands of Victorian historicism. These three strands of historicism differed because they drew on the somewhat distinctive traditions of Whig historiography, German romanticism, and positivism. Next I will discuss some of the issues and debates that confronted Victorian historicists. These included whether or not historicism applied to the natural world; the relationship of historicism to religious faith; the place of the individual in society; how to balance progress with nostalgia; and the telos and universality of historical development. Finally, to conclude, I suggest that the decline of developmental historicism can be traced to the rise of modernist ideas in the late nineteenth century and the way in which the First World War undermined the Victorian faith in reason and progress. Ironically, therefore, the word "historicism" entered the English language at the very moment when the historicist worldview that had dominated the Victorian era was beginning to give way to the modernist sensibility that came to dominate the twentieth century.

The Rise of Historicism

For much of the early modern era up to the late eighteenth century, learning could be divided into three broad disciplines, namely, natural philosophy, natural history, and human history.[3] Natural philosophy focused on astronomy and cosmology. Natural history was the study of living organisms. Human history focused on the classical world, political history, and literature, defined broadly to cover all written texts.

Despite its title, "natural history" was often not particularly historical, let alone historicist. Natural historians attempted to perceive an order within the living world of plants and animals. Much of their work involved collecting and identifying species. When they tried to explain these species, they appealed less to historical narrative than to classificatory systems. They tried to fit things into a larger and generally ahistorical order. Most natural historians believed that the order of things was divinely inspired. Studying nature was, for them, part of theology. They searched for evidence of God's design and purpose. Each specimen and each species was a fixed part of the divine creation.

[3] For historicist perspectives on early modern thought and on the shift from natural philosophy to natural science in the early nineteenth century, see respectively M. Osler, "Mixing Metaphors: Science and Religion or Natural Philosophy and Theology in Early Modern Europe," *History of Science* 36 (1997), 91–113, and S. Schaffer, "Scientific Discoveries and the End of Natural Philosophy," *Social Studies of Science* 16 (1986), 387–420.

While natural history continued throughout the eighteenth century to offer classifications within a divine order of things, the latter part of the century saw the study of human history take on what has been characterized as a historicist slant.[4] Enlightenment historicism sought to make sense of historical events by placing them in the broader historical circumstances in which they occurred. This focus on historical circumstances reflected a more critical attitude toward historical evidence and a belief that this evidence might reveal laws akin to those being discovered in natural philosophy by scientists such as Isaac Newton. The main British examples of Enlightenment historicism were the conjectural histories of Scottish Whigs such as Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith.[5] The term "conjectural history" described the process of appealing speculatively to natural (not divine) causes that might plausibly have resulted in the relevant events. Conjectural history soon became associated, more specifically, with the idea that all societies progress through the same four broad stages of development: Societies develop from a hunting stage, through a pastoral stage and an agricultural one, to reach a final commercial stage.

There was no decisive break between the Enlightenment and the Victorian historicism that occupies center stage in this book. Romanticism followed so fast on the Enlightenment that it can be almost impossible to disentangle the two. Most sharp distinctions between the two rely on a false dichotomy based on a caricature of the Enlightenment. Romanticism may have been a reaction against the Enlightenment, but it also absorbed much from the Enlightenment. One strand of Victorian historicism was a clear extension of the conjectural histories of the Whig tradition.

Much of the Victorian human sciences fused Enlightenment conjectural history with more explicitly evolutionary and developmental motifs.[6]

[4] On romantic historicism and its relation to what has come after and what went before see J. Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), and A. Jarrels, "'Associations Respect[ing] the Past': Enlightenment and Romantic Historicism," in J. Klancher, ed., *A Concise Companion to the Romantic Age* (Oxford: Blackwells, 2009), pp. 57–76.

[5] For a survey of Enlightenment historicism across Europe see S. Bourgault and R. Sparling, *A Companion to Enlightenment Historiography* (Leiden: Brill, 2013). For its place in the human sciences see C. Fox, R. Porter, and R. Wokler, eds., *Inventing Human Science: Eighteenth Century Domains* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). For its impact on the writing of history see M. Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740–1820* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). For its literary dimensions see N. Wolloch, *History and Nature in the Enlightenment* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011). For a study of some broader vitalist moments in Enlightenment thought see C. Packham, *Eighteenth-Century Vitalism: Bodies, Culture, Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

[6] M. Bevir, "The Long Nineteenth Century in Intellectual History," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 6 (2001), 313–35 and J. Burrow, *Evolution and Society: A Study in Victorian Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966).

The Whig tradition persisted most notably among liberal Anglican historians such as Thomas Arnold and Julius Hare.[7] These historians thought of reason as a key with which they could unlock history, conceived as the record of God's dealings with mankind. Although their historicism was rooted in the historical philosophy of the Scottish Whigs, it was also a reaction against the eighteenth century, for they drew on Samuel Coleridge's idealism to oppose Enlightenment rationalism. Coleridge himself was raised as a Unitarian by his father, but in his adult years he espoused a form of Anglican Trinitarianism. In his *On the Constitution of Church and State*, he offered a novel defense of establishment. He began by defining the state as an organic and ethical whole that promoted the common good of its citizens. In order to fulfill this role, he continued, the state required a Clerisy, organized in a national Church, and serving as both a repository of the knowledge of the nation and a guardian of spirit of the nation.[8] The liberal Anglican historians generally followed Coleridge in seeing the Church as a unifying force – required by the state but not subordinate to it – that embodied the national spirit. Consequently, they fused church history with the history of the nation.

Religious themes continued to infuse much history written later in the Victorian era. History was often a way of defending Christian faith. Histories were written as evidence of God's reality in the world. Lord Acton, William Stubbs, and others confidently narrated history, and especially British history, as progressive, and as a source of national pride, because they treated it as an expression of the validity of a Christian faith. Other Whig historicists, including Henry Maine, used more anthropological and sociological conjectures to develop comparative approaches to the historical development of the law.[9] Yet other Whig historicists, most notably Walter Bagehot, grounded their theories of historical development in conjectures about the psychological or biological bases of pre-history.[10]

While one strand of Victorian historicism can be seen in part as an extension of the Whig tradition, other strands were almost entirely

[7] D. Forbes, *The Liberal Anglican Historians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952). For later Whig historians in the Victorian era see P. Blaas, *Continuity and Anachronism: Parliamentary and Constitutional Development in Whig Historiography and in the Anti-Whig Reaction between 1890 and 1930* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978) and J. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[8] J. Morrow, *Coleridge's Political Thought* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990).

[9] H. Maine, *The Ancient Law: Its Connection with the Early History of Society and Its Relation to Modern Ideas* (London: John Murray, 1861).

[10] W. Bagehot, "Physics and Politics," in N. John-Stevas, ed., *The Collected Works of Walter Bagehot, Vol. 7: The Political Essays* (London: Economist, 1965–86), pp. 15–144.

derived from romantic or positivist thinkers. Even the liberal Anglican historians and their successors were indebted not only to Whiggism but, at least as importantly, to Coleridge's British translation and transformation of the ideas that he took from the German romantics.[11]

So, if we should not exaggerate the break between the Enlightenment and romanticism, we also should not ignore it.[12] The impact of romanticism becomes clearer once we approach romanticism less as a narrow literary and artistic movement and more as a broad stress on the organic. The romantics emphasized the ability of living things to create a fluid and changing order for themselves through deliberate activity infused with purpose, thought, and imagination. They treated mind as a vital and active force in the world. Change and imagination were seen as the norm. Less attention was given to stable mechanisms. This romanticism appears throughout the sciences in the first half of the nineteenth century as questions of time, dynamics, and evolution challenged those of system, statics, and balance. And this romanticism brought in its wake a new emphasis on both imaginative sympathy with the inner lives of agents and new evolutionary approaches to society.[13]

Romanticism appears as a broad organicist worldview most clearly and most prominently in the German context. In the late eighteenth century, German scholarship on the life sciences increasingly made use of a developmental concept of organic form.[14] Alexander von Humboldt emphasized the unity of nature, believing that science should reveal the harmony among things. By the early nineteenth century, German idealist philosophers were often building metaphysical systems around organicist themes. For example, F. W. J. Schelling's study of natural philosophy tried to show how the ideal emerged from the real. Schelling argued that

[11] On the importance of British Platonism as the background to Coleridge's engagement with German philosophy, see D. Hedley, *Coleridge, Philosophy and Religion: Aids to Reflection and the Mirror of the Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[12] For a fascinating attempt to present the nineteenth-century human sciences as a construction built on an organic concept of life see M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock, 1970). For my own critical assessment of Foucault's achievement see M. Bevir, "A Humanist Critique of the Archaeology of the Human Sciences," *History of the Human Sciences* 15 (2002), 119–38.

[13] For a study of the romantic poets' attitudes to some of these broader trends in the study of natural and human history see M. McLane, *Romanticism and the Human Sciences: Poetry, Population, and the Discourse of the Species* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[14] See R. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), and more generally A. Cunningham and N. Jardine, eds., *Romanticism and the Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

spirit was the invisible force driving all nature, so that nature was simply a visible manifestation of spirit. In his view, history was the progressive revelation of the absolute.

German romanticism inspired a strand of Victorian historicism that overlapped with the Whiggish one discussed earlier, but that relied less on historiographical arguments and more on romantic and idealist philosophies. Coleridge was, of course, a key figure here. In his youth, he believed in Necessitarianism, with its mechanistic outlook. But in the early nineteenth century he immersed himself in German idealism, with its dynamic outlook. This romantic organicism spread through much of the Victorian era, whether directly from German idealists or indirectly by way of Coleridge, and whether as a dominant outlook or as a strand entering other traditions such as the Whig one.

More specialized lines of influence also brought German romanticism to British soil. Germans such as Franz Bopp and Wilhelm von Humboldt crafted a more rigorous and historical approach to comparative linguistics. Max Müller studied in Germany, where he worked with Bopp, before moving to Britain, where he became successively Professor of Modern European Languages and Professor of Comparative Philology at the University of Oxford. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Müller's work had given ideas derived from the German romantics a dominant position in British studies of the historical development of languages and religions.[15] Elsewhere, German romanticism helped to inspire a historicist approach to economics. The German Historical School of Economics, from Bruno Hildebrand to Werner Sombart, drew on idealist philosophy and evolutionary theorizing to champion a historical and inductive alternative to the more deductive approach of classical and neoclassical economics from David Ricardo onward. In their view, economic activity arose in specific cultures, so economic knowledge could not be generalized outside such cultures. Their ideas helped to inspire the historical economics of figures such as T. E. Cliffe Leslie, W. J. Ashley, and William Cunningham.[16]

German romanticism was not the only European source of Victorian historicism. A contrast can be made between the romantic historicism just discussed and a positivist historicism associated perhaps with the legacy of Leopold von Ranke, and more definitely with the impact of Auguste Comte. Ranke's proposals for a science of history privileged the

[15] L. van den Bosch, *Friedrich Max Müller: A Life Devoted to the Humanities* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).
[16] G. Koot, *English Historical Economics, 1870–1926* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

rigorous collection and sifting of facts. Comte's alternative proposals were embedded in his narrative of social evolution from a theological stage, through a metaphysical stage, to the final positive stage. This positive scientific stage dated, in Comte's view, from the Napoleonic era. Science was taking the place of theological fictions and metaphysical abstractions. A religion of humanity would soon fulfill the emotional role of the Churches, and although government had to depend on popular consent, policy would increasingly become the domain of scientifically informed engineers and experts.

Comtists such as Frederic Harrison had much in common with other developmental historicists. They too understood human life to be inherently historical, and history to be inherently progressive. The main difference was that many romantic historicists, and all Christian historicists, believed that progress was the record of God's will, whereas the positivists believed that metaphysics and Christianity would be replaced by science and a "religion of humanity." The positivists and their successors conceived of progress in more secular terms, as, for example, increased prosperity and social complexity, or the triumph of reason and morality.

Victorian positivists, including Harrison, adopted a republican positivism that sought to integrate the working class into a political vision of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Although these republican positivists remained small in number, Comte had a much wider influence, as exemplified, most famously, by George Eliot.[17] A wider evolutionary and ethical positivism, detached from Comte's liturgy and republican politics, was a common Victorian response to the problems of religious faith. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Victorians such as Beatrice and Sidney Webb rejected evangelicalism and classical liberalism for an evolutionary and ethical positivism that fused Herbert Spencer's sociology with Comte's idea of a duty of service to man.[18]

By the late Victorian era, these strands of historicism – Whig, romantic, and positivist – were increasingly difficult to disentangle. Late Victorians drew on themes from each, creating diffuse discourses in which, typically, an evolutionary cosmology embedded the claim that the

[17] On liturgical, republican, and evolutionary positivisms, see respectively W. Simon, "August Comte's English Disciples," *Victorian Studies* 8 (1964), 161–72; R. Harrison, *Before the Socialists* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965); B. Willey, *Nineteenth Century Studies* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), pp. 214–60. For a general study see also T. Wright, *The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[18] M. Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 173–94.

individual was part of a larger whole, and so an ethic of fellowship. Sometimes this discourse went with a militant hostility to religious faith; secularists often combined it with republican forms of positivism. At other times, it acted more like a substitute faith, providing a structure of meaning, as it did for William Jupp, who adopted a romantic pantheism inspired by Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Wordsworth. It helped to inspire new religious movements, particularly the occult, theosophical, and hermetic organizations that attracted people such as Annie Besant and Anna Kingsford. And it spread among Christians who adopted an immanentist theology, perhaps emphasizing the Incarnation over the Atonement, as did the *Lux Mundi* group, or perhaps emphasizing the moral example provided by the life of Jesus the man.[19]

The Height of Historicism

Readers might approach the chapters that follow in various ways. One would be to begin with the chapter on "History," perhaps thinking history the obvious home of historicism, and then moving on to the other chapters. This approach would suit someone interested in the nature of the study of history in Victorian Britain and in the ways in which history was used and appropriated in other fields of study. Historians of historiography and students of British history might find this approach particularly attractive. Clearly, however, I have adopted a different approach, reflecting the preceding arguments about the differences between Enlightenment and romantic historicism and the organicist nature of the latter. The order of the chapters reflects the claim that Victorian historicism can be understood as arising out of a broad intellectual shift from a Newtonian view rooted in physics to a romantic organicism rooted in the life sciences. The early chapters trace the rise of organicist historicism in the study of "Life" and "Race." The next chapters explore the place of organicist historicism in the study of the crucial romantic topics of "Language," "Literature," and self, or "Moral Character." The chapter on "History" then provides an opportunity to reflect on the overlaps and fates of various strands of historicism in the study of the past. The concluding chapters go on to look at the ways in which organicist historicism has had an impact on the study of social and political life, especially "Political Economy," "Empire," and "International Law."

[19] W. Jupp, *The Religion of Nature and of Human Experience* (London: P. Green, 1906); A. Kingsford and E. Maitland, *The Perfect Way* (London: Field & Tuer, 1887); C. Gore, ed., *Lux Mundi* (London: J. Murray, 1819); S. Brooke, *Christ in Modern Life* (London: H. King, 1872).

The central focus of the book is, in other words, how organicist themes transformed the intellectual landscape of Victorian Britain. Developmental historicism became all-pervasive. Although Victorian historicists sometimes echoed the Whig outlook of the Scottish Enlightenment or the proto-positivism that can perhaps be read into Ranke, they also broke dramatically with these earlier ways of thinking precisely because of romantic organicism's impact upon them. So, for example, although J. S. Mill was raised by his father to be an exemplar of the Enlightenment spirit, he ended up trying to balance Coleridge and Comte, not Smith and Ranke.[20]

Developmental historicism became ubiquitous, but it contained competing strands and it allowed for conflicting views on important issues. One issue was how far to extend historicism and, in particular, whether historicism and teleology governed natural history as well as human history. Some thinkers wanted to restrict historicism to the organic. Some of them began to distinguish between biology, conceived as the study of the evolution of life, and natural history, conceived to include topics such as geology. Charles Darwin added substantial intellectual clout to evolutionary theory, defined in contrast to natural history.[21] He lent further weight to the idea that historical lines of descent were of greater explanatory importance than formal classifications. However, Darwin's theory still left plenty of room for debate.[22] In particular, there was still no consensus on the processes by which natural selection took place. Many biologists accepted evolution, but not Darwin's theory of natural selection. Further, even when biologists accepted the theory of natural selection, they still discussed whether that theory meant that evolution was random or teleological. Darwin was widely believed to oppose teleology, but his public pronouncements on the matter were far from clear-cut, and anyway, whatever his views, other biologists generally continued to combine evolution with teleology.

In his contribution to this book, Bernard Lightman shows that even hardcore Darwinians struggled to disentangle evolutionary theory from developmentalism. Herbert Spencer, John Tyndall, and T. H. Huxley owed a debt to German romanticism, and its teleological outlook long

[20] For a study of Mill that usefully highlights his (sometimes deliberately hidden) debt to the German romantics, see N. Capaldi, *John Stuart Mill: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[21] On the importance of natural history and natural theology in Darwin's early thought and his subsequent move away from them, see D. Ospovat, *The Development of Darwin's Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[22] P. Bowler, *The Eclipse of Darwinism: Anti-Darwinian Evolution Theories in the Decades around 1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).