

From Alfred Dove's Preface to Leopold von Ranke's *Weltgeschichte*, Part IX, Section 2 (1888)

Abstract

Leopold von Ranke's (1795–1886) influence on the modern study of history cannot be overestimated. His source-based methods, which attempted to establish history as a scientific discipline, were outlined in numerous important publications. This selection includes several key elements of Rankean historicism. These include the pre-reflective belief that events in the present derive meaning from the past in an unbroken continuum of sequential causation, the imperative of conducting exacting rational investigations of the past, and the cognitive interplay between the particular/individual and the general/universal in endowing events with proper order and significance. The selection also ascribes special importance to historical knowledge in the establishment of national identity and belonging, a move that promoted historians in nineteenth-century Germany to figures of national responsibility.

Source

[...] "Let us admit," he now says, "that history can never have the unity of a philosophical system, but it is still not without inner connection. Before us we see a series of sequential events that affect each other. If I say 'affect,' that does not, of course, mean by absolute necessity. The important thing is rather that human freedom plays a role everywhere: historical writing follows scenes of freedom; that is its great charm. Freedom, however, is combined with force, original force; without this force, freedom would cease in world events as well as in the realm of ideas. Any moment something new can again begin, something new that can only be attributed to the first and common source of all human activities. Nothing is there completely for the sake of the other; nothing is completely absorbed in the reality of the other. At the same time, however, there is also a deep inner connection, from which no one is completely independent, and which permeates everything. But next to freedom stands necessity. It lies in that which has already been formed and which cannot be reversed, which is the basis of all newly emerging activity. What has been constitutes the connection with what is becoming. But even this connection is not something that should be regarded as arbitrary; instead, the connection occurred in a particular manner, in this way and no other. It is likewise an object of cognition. A long series of sequential and simultaneous events linked to each other in this manner form a century, an epoch. The differences between epochs are based on the fact that different conditions arise from the struggle between the extremes of freedom and necessity in various times. If, from this perspective, we visualize the succession of centuries, each with its own original essence, all linked in a chain, then we have universal history before us, from the beginning to the present day. Universal history encompasses the past life of the human race, not in its individual relationships and directions but rather in its fullness and totality.

This is what distinguishes the science of universal history from specialized research—the former, even when researching a particular detail, never loses sight of the big picture.

The study of particular circumstances, even a single point, has value if it is well done. When applied to things human, it always sheds light on something directly worth knowing; it is instructive even on a small scale, for that

which is human is always worth knowing. But it will always relate to a larger context; local history is related to the history of a country, biography to larger events in the state and church, or to an epoch of national or general history. But all these epochs, as we have stated, belong to the big picture that we call universal history. Their study in a broader context has a correspondingly greater value. The ultimate goal, still not achieved, will always be the conception and production of a history of mankind. In following the course that historical studies of our time have taken and must continue upon, insofar as they are supposed to represent thoroughly researched, precisely known things, we run the risk of losing sight of the general, that which everyone desires to know. History is not just to be studied for school. Knowledge of the history of mankind should be the common property of mankind and should especially benefit the nations to which we belong and without which our studies themselves would not exist.

We need not worry about succumbing to the vague generalities with which an earlier time contented itself. These generalities should not even be put forth anymore, given the fruitfulness and incisiveness of those diligent and energetic studies that have been undertaken everywhere. Furthermore, we cannot return to the systematic categories with which we occupied ourselves at times. An accumulation of historical notes with fleeting assessments of character and morality will not lead to thorough and satisfactory knowledge either. In my view, we must focus on two directions: studying the impetuses behind events and perceiving their general connection.

Of course, embracing the whole and still doing justice to the principles of research will always remain an ideal; it would presuppose a solid understanding of the entire history of humanity. Even research on one point or another requires deep and penetrating study. Today, however, we all agree that criticism, objective understanding, and broad synthesis can and must go together. Establishing a connection to the general cannot harm research. Without the general, research would go cold; without research, the general understanding would devolve into idle fantasy.”

[...]

Source: Alfred Dove, “Preface,” in Leopold von Ranke, *Weltgeschichte*, Part IX, Section 2: *Über die Epochen der neueren Geschichte. Vorträge dem Könige Maximilian II. von Bayern gehalten*, edited by Alfred Dove, including a complete index of Parts I–IX, revised by Georg Winter, Leipzig: Verlag von Dunker and Humblot, 1888, pp. XIII–XVI.

Translation: Kathleen Dell’Orto

Recommended Citation: From Alfred Dove’s Preface to Leopold von Ranke’s *Weltgeschichte*, Part IX, Section 2 (1888), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/knowledge-and-education/ghis:document-139>> [April 27, 2024].