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FULL ARTICLE

Introduction

Few concepts have been employed in so many conflicting ways as that of historicism. Whether it is an established trend or a polemical term, a scientific paradigm or a worldview, the notion of historicism is eminently polysemic, carried by a complex history that ran through the nineteenth century until the 1930s. Initially appearing in Germany in the context of the emergence of the historical science, historicism thus brings together various currents of thought claiming recourse to historical methods to oppose the traditionally more “abstract,” speculative, or metaphysical approaches.

This period, characterized by the emergence and gradual imposition of the concept of History, corresponds to a major “historical turning point,” if one understands by this both a founding moment in the history of science, through the foundation and institutionalization of the field of historical science as such, but also, and in parallel, a period that witnessed the gradual awareness of the radical historicity of all things. According to Reinhart Koselleck, the concept of History as a totality, thought as a “collective singular” appeared at the end of the eighteenth century to account for the new experience generated by the succession of revolutions, political developments, and the subsequent acceleration of time. Breaking with the transcendental and still theologized conception that had prevailed until then, history was soon to impose itself as the only legitimate source of legitimacy which has completely reshaped the field of knowledge. The appearance, use, and evolution of the notion of historicism testify precisely to the resistance, polemics, and debates that characterized this period of the historicization of thinking. It is from the specific context of the German world that one should begin in order to understand the specificity of this concept, its polysemy, and its polemical character, but also its mutations in the course of a particularly turbulent history.

Given the complexity of the history of this term and the issues that it covers, historicism cannot, therefore, be reduced to the definition that Karl Popper sought to give in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) and in *The Poverty of Historicism* (1956). Assimilating

historicism to its scientist version, Popper defined it as an approach to the social sciences which assumes that historical prediction is their principal aim, and “that this aim is attainable by discovering the ‘rhythms’ or the ‘patterns’, the ‘laws’ or the ‘trends’ that underlie the evolution of history” (Popper, 1957: 2). By claiming to identify general laws, going as far as to predict future events, historicism would thus put forward, according to Popper, a deterministic and evolutionist conception of history, to establish the scientificity of historical science in the same way as natural sciences. It is certain that Popper’s argument not only informed the debate, but also influenced the engagement with historicism in the postwar period. Furthermore, this argument lays behind the misunderstanding, not to say the contempt of the term, which only a thorough review of the term’s history, complexity and plurivocity, can dispel. Far from being reduced to a fixed meaning, historicism, as we can observe when we retrace the history of the concept, changes its meaning in different phases and overall through the progressive historicization of mentalities that characterized the last two centuries. Thus, it initially refers to the tendency toward a more empirical approach against the drifts of the metaphysics of history and such abstract approaches. Yet as the historical approach gained ground in different fields from the last third of the nineteenth century onward, historicism came to represent, another challenge, one directly related to the progression of historical positivism from which most of the disciplines tried to dissociate themselves. By the end of the First World War, it is precisely this radicalization that leads to the so-called crisis of historicism and its consequences, namely, relativism and the loss of values to which historicism will often be assimilated. It is then a matter of “solving the problem of history by history” and historicism becomes a solution to the crisis of a Western world henceforth deprived of the legitimacy that the relationship to a transcendent history provided. Castigated after the catastrophes of the Second World War, historicism reappears in the 1960s on the other side of the Atlantic in the form of the New Historicism and other contemporary forms advocating a radical historicization. In this new phase too historicism is marked by the intrinsic ambiguity which characterizes its history. This is how the New historicism paradoxically comes, at the end of this course, to claim to be part of it while questioning its own postulates and the very presuppositions on which it was based from the very beginning.

Background/Context: Emergence, Resistance, and Controversies

According to the history of the term, its first occurrence is due to Friedrich Schlegel (1797), then to Novalis (1799). However, it was only the second half of the nineteenth century, along with the decline of Hegelian thought, that the concept became more widespread and acquired various meanings. If historicism took shape based on this heritage, it was initially to distance itself from it and to oppose the overly speculative, abstract, or idealist conceptions that characterized the “metaphysics of history” (Geschichtsmetaphysik) inherited from Hegelian thought until then. Against Popper’s interpretation, it appears that

historicism (Historismus), which emerged in Germany at the beginning of the nineteenth century, was above all a reaction to Hegelianism, in particular against the latter's speculative drift and still transcendent conception of history. Advocated by the proponents of an empirical, more "immanent" or "realistic" approach, the historicism, as claimed by some of the young Hegelians, was also marked by the refusal of a purely materialist or uncritical approach. It is this in-between position and the rejection of both any speculative approach and pure positivism, which is undoubtedly the defining element, from the first criticisms addressed to Hegel to the later proponents of historicism. The very first attempts to "immanentize" Hegelian philosophy can be traced in the writings of young Hegelians such as Christlieb Julius Braniss, Carl Prantl, and Robert Haym, but also Karl Marx. The emphasis is placed on Hegelian "panlogicism," which gives itself the task of recapturing the historical conditions of the deployment of reason in history, as well as the still speculative project of universal history. If the term is not established yet, it tends most often to designate an abuse, in Feuerbach's terms a consciousness deformed by a bad relationship to history, whether it is assimilated to Hegelianism or to the abusive use of the historical method. The "critical antihistoricism" (kritischer Antihistorizismus) of which he claims aims at avoiding the impasse of the philosophy of history through a materialist and causal approach to history.

While Feuerbach was one of the first to defend the achievements of historical science against Hegel's speculative historicism, other attempts to do so, largely inspired by Fichte's critique of Hegel, tried to reconcile speculation with the positiveness of empirical research. A student of Fichte and Schleiermacher, Christlieb Julius Braniss was the first to claim the term historicism and to make it the cornerstone of his philosophy. In his book *The Scientific Mission of the Present as a Guiding Idea* (1848), he proposed to supplement the purely causal and empirical approach with an eschatology, thought of as the most accomplished form of reflexivity achieved by the human spirit. Assuming the role of primary philosophy, the historicism that he claimed would thus recapture, in a very Hegelian motif, the great stages of the progressive realization of human consciousness. If following Braniss, Carl Prantl too denounced the "anti-historical" (antihistorisch) character of Hegelian philosophy and opposed an "objective idealism," considered as the only approach able to explain the real inscription of the ideal in history. It is precisely this dimension that his disciple Felix Dahn would put forward when he presented Prantl's historicism as "a methodical moment rather than a speculative principle," allowing us not only to recapture the world of the spirit realizing itself in history as Hegel did but also to reconcile it with sensible naturalness, the object of positive sciences. If history is still conceived as a rational process which marks the progressive conquest by the spirit of its natural anchoring, it is no longer suspended from the transcendence of an extrinsic instance. The process of totalizing history now depends solely on the reflexive capacity of the human spirit to re-understand reflexively its historical development. For the proponents of historicism in these early years, it is therefore less of a question of rejecting the "speculative need" in favor of empirical reality alone, as the most 'materialist' young Hegelians (Feuerbach, Ruge, Bauer) claim, than to highlight the

ambitions of the philosophy of history. Thanks to this reflexivity, the philosophy of history was then able to complete and achieve the historical approach in a totalizing vision to which empirical sciences couldn't reach.

A few years later, Hegelian philosophy was once again at the center of Rudolf Haym's critique of historicism in the courses he taught in Berlin and published in 1857 under the now-famous title *Hegel and His Time*. By calling for a "reconciliation with reality," Haym intended to clarify at its very root the problem raised by Hegelian philosophy, beyond its scientific or methodological scope, in particular its political stakes and conservative position on law and the state. Like many texts published at the same time in the prestigious Berlin nationalist journal *Preußische Jahrbücher* directed by Heinrich von Treitschke, Rudolf Haym's work bore witness to the disappointment and hopes trampled underfoot by the hardening and authoritarianism of the Restoration after the Springtime of the Peoples and the debacle of 1848. The approach of Haym who was to participate in the founding of the National Liberal Party at the Prussian Congress of 1866 was just as much philosophical as it was political. As he states in his autobiography, the work on Hegel was intended to be "as much a part of the scientific struggle as of the political struggle; against speculation, it was intended to defend liberalism and national politics." His aim was clearly to highlight the political dimension of Hegelian philosophy which, under the guise of a transcendent and speculative approach, would serve political interests, especially conservative ones. As he pointed out, not only was the Hegelian conception of history metaphysical, but his metaphysics would itself be historical, and thus nothing more than an ideology among others. It is only by "temporalizing and immanentizing what until then had seemed infinite and beyond, by going back over the course of history, that it becomes possible to reduce to something purely historical what until then had passed for dogmatic, for objectively real, for a metaphysics or a religion, for something eternal and fixed" (Haym, 1927: 9). The reference to empirical history thus demystifies Hegelian metaphysics and its undue claims to be ahistorical. Through this double critique, all the characteristics of historicism are already in place and will remain so until its most recent forms: critique and demystification of any transcendental or supposedly ahistorical position, but also the refusal of positivism or reduction to mere empiricism. It is against this double pitfall that historicism will try to protect itself: on the one hand, the speculative or supra-historical impasse of the metaphysics of history against which it struggles from the beginning and on the other the positivist threat which will lead a century later to the famous crisis of historicism.

From these years on, it is no longer so much the use of the historical method that is contested, as it was in the 1820s and 1830s, but the relativization brought about by this gradual historicization, which prevents any normative, "ideal," or ethical perspective. If historical science, which acquired a rigorous methodology in the second half of the nineteenth century, found a real impetus by freeing itself from the philosophy of history and its speculative presuppositions, it did not, therefore, renounce all idealist, transcendental, or even theological aims, as Ranke's approach shows. However, it was under the guise of

attention to facts and empiricism that the historical approach claimed to have the rigor and scientificity that enabled it to provide other disciplines with an objective and empirical guarantee. Its introduction to fields that had previously excluded it, such as jurisprudence, economics, and theology, led to such upheavals as to call into question the theories, dogmas, and principles that had hitherto been dominant.

The questioning of the Hegelian approach, in particular its transcendent and totalizing character, in favor of a more empirical and immanent approach, combined with the professionalization of the discipline, has thus enabled the historical approach to rapidly extend its influence to all fields. From an initially auxiliary or purely methodological position, as historiography still was in the eighteenth century, history was gradually endowed with a new dignity, a critical authority, and a source of objectivity that would henceforth guarantee the scientificity of the disciplines gradually conquering the emerging field of the human sciences. Initially, an invective aimed at discrediting those who advocated the use of history and historical methods in their respective fields, the notion of historicism was soon erected as a watchword by the supporters of historicization, which continued to grow until the interwar period. In this respect, the history of historicism is inseparable from the various quarrels and conflicts (Methodenstreit, Lamprechtstreit, Werturteilstreit, etc.) that it generated as it became established in the various fields. Founded in 1814 by Friedrich Karl von Savigny, the Historical Law School was itself born out of the controversy it had with Friedrich Justus Thibaut, an advocate of the drafting of a German national code-based, like the Napoleonic code, on the model of natural law and Jusnaturalism inherited from the Enlightenment. Unlike Thibaut, Savigny intended to emphasize the study of local, individual, and historical particularities as the only way to prevent the arbitrariness of a purely systematic approach. He mobilized a customary conception of law that was supposed to emanate organically from the spirit of a people, preventing it from reaching a level of universality, as Hegel himself would emphasize in *The Principles of the Philosophy of Law* (1821). In line with Hegel's criticism of Savigny in the field of law, as well as that of Dühring and later Menger in economics, Rudolf Stammler was not the first, thirty years later, to denounce under the term "historicism" the claim of certain jurists to limit law to the history of law (Rechtsgeschichte). In the early 1880s, this debate was repeated 50 years later between Stammler and Ernst Immanuel Bekker, then the leading representative of the historical school of law and heir to Savigny. On the one hand, Stammler intended to reaffirm the existence of universally valid norms by which jurisprudence could achieve the status of a purely aprioristic science; on the other hand, Bekker's historicism only recognized non-generalizable particularities, such as Roman law, which he considered valid only for locally determined and temporally given conditions.

If the discipline of law is being reformed by the repercussions of the increasing historicization linked to the rise of historiography from the first third of the century, political economy also suffered from its counter-effects. From 1840 onward, what has been retrospectively called the "old historical school" was formed around Friedrich List, Bruno

Hildebrand, Wilhelm Roscher, and Karl Knies, who wanted to extend to the economic sphere what the Savigny method had achieved in the field of law. In reaction to the overly abstract approach of the classical theory (A. Smith, D. Ricardo), the aim was to rethink the economy, no longer based solely on the presupposed rationality of the economic agent, the abstract *homo oeconomicus*, but by shedding light on exchange in the context of institutional, cultural, and social conditions. This meant not only breaking with the "absolutism of theory" (*Absolutismus der Theorie*) of the classical school but also paying attention to the empirical, involving the systematic use of historical sources, statistics, and empirical and comparative surveys. The new school aimed to realistically recontextualize the old market theory, thereby relativizing the validity of the economic laws hitherto defended by neoclassical theory by rethinking them in the light of past economic development.

These reforms in the field of national economics immediately aroused resistance, leading to particularly violent controversies and quarrels, such as the most famous one in the 1880s between Carl Menger and Gustav Schmoller, the leader of the "young" historical school. Schmoller intended to radicalize the historicism of his predecessors by expanding the old classical conception of economics, which had so far been reduced to the rational sphere of market interests, into genuine social science. He thus advocated using descriptive, historical, and statistical material to recontextualize economic theory and highlight social and political problems that had been ignored by the old school. It was in reaction to this conception that Carl Menger, the main representative of the Austrian "formal" or "marginalist" school, set off the famous "method dispute" (*Methodenstreit*) against the new historical school with the publication of the controversial and polemical work *The Errors of Historicism in the German National Economy* (1884). In it, he intended to attack head-on the epistemological claims of the "young" historical school. The submission of economic science to historical research, under the guise of ensuring its objectivity, would lead, according to him, to the denial of any claim to derive universal and valid economic laws. Far from being deduced from pre-existing historical material, as Schmoller argues, these laws owe their validity to a "deduction drawn from a priori axioms." According to Menger, not only was the historical school theoretically deficient but it couldn't guarantee the scientificity of the discipline of economics. Adolf Wagner, followed by Richard Schüller in 1895, took up this criticism, starting a controversy that was followed much later by a second controversy, in the late 1930s, between Bernhard Laum and Walter Eucken. What is most often challenged and criticized here is not so much the use of the historical empirical approach as its limitation to the point of undermining any theoretical or normative approach. This is the case of Eugen Dühring who, having adopted the historical method, denounced in 1866 under the title of "historicism" the immoderate use of it in the economic field in favor of a normative approach. The debate then shifted to the question of history's claim to provide practical and normative guidance, opening a debate in which the third generation of the historical school (Weber, Sombart) took sides. It was this discussion on historicism that led, 60 years later, to the split of the historical school at the end of the

“Value Judgment Controversy” (Werturteilstreit) initiated in 1910 by Max Weber. Faced with the relativist threat, Weber concluded and proposed to dissociate the scientific process from all value judgments in the name of neutrality or “axiological freedom.”

If the question of historicism was progressively at the center of the controversies opposing its detractors to the new historical school in jurisprudence, and then in political economy, it was in theology that the conflict was sharpest in the late 1890s. Concerning the vast secularization movement initiated by Protestant theology, accompanied by a hermeneutical return to the interpretation of texts and the progressive interference of social interests in the religious sphere, the nineteenth century marked a return to the “natural religion” projects initiated in the previous century, which aimed to bring Christianity back to its source and ensure its status as a true “religion of the future.” As early as 1835, when his book *The Life of Jesus* was published, David Friedrich Strauss had already contributed to a debate on the historical reality of Christ, bringing together a small group of theologians—the *Leben-Jesu-Forschung*—to reconstruct the real life of Christ by giving a realistic biography of him through historical science. Such an approach aimed not only at questioning the veracity of the biblical narratives but also at providing theology with scientific objectivity legitimized by the methodology and implementation of historical criticism. Although his aim was not, in his own words, to touch the “substance of the Christian faith,” his work nevertheless appeared to be a real provocation and a definitive disavowal of Christianity, reducing faith to a mere superstition, social convention, or mythical reference. Criticism was almost unanimous leading to his immediate dismissal from the Tübinger Stift. Nevertheless, Strauss’s work was to have a unique destiny, to the point of becoming an essential reference for all subsequent challenges to dogmatic theology. Nietzsche himself was to make a fierce criticism of it in his first *Untimely Meditation* (1873), taking up Franz Overbeck’s thesis and his diagnosis of the ineluctable end of Christianity (*finis christianismi*) because of this radical questioning of traditional dogmatic theology through historical science.

One of the strongest criticisms of Strauss’s historicism is that of Martin Kähler, in a work published in 1892 under the title *The So-called Jesus of History and the Biblical Historical Christ*. He criticized Strauss not so much for using the historical method as for confusing two incommensurable planes, the realm of faith, as object of dogmatics, and the scientific approach, which offered no access to it. He thus called for the preservation of the evangelical dogma from the relativization brought about by historicization in theology. Kähler’s critique and the solution he proposed through the strict separation of two irreducible levels—namely, between a transcendent order that remained the object of belief and the resolutely immanent approach of empirical science—are the subjects of numerous debates in the years that follow. The debates were intense and passionate in light of the new confidence in modern scientific methods, which allow to envision a possible revival of Christianity. Considered as the fruit of a transcendent revelation, intimate religious experience thus becomes one of the last bulwarks against the relativism of values

brought about by historicism. A few years later, in his book published in 1904, *Dogmatics and Historicism*, Julius Kaftan proposed to limit the claims of historicism, showing that the debate initially posed by Strauss on the historicity of Christ should be radicalized and extended to dogmatics. If historicism came to relativize the absolute, ruining any possibility of thinking about it without relating it to some historical formation, it was then necessary to limit the scope of this historicization and to define an absolute that could not be compromised with historical reality. The debate between the proponents of a so-called liberal or historical theology and their "anti-historical" detractors involved in the so-called dialectical renewal of theology after the war, would only become more pronounced until the interwar period, rendering any dialogue between the two camps impossible. Going beyond the simple conflict of method by which theological historicism was characterized in its early stages, the debates then shifted to a real "cultural struggle" (*Kulturkampf*), in which theology was to offer a bulwark against relativization and provide orientation in a world that was henceforth deprived of reference points.

The "method dispute" (*Methodenstreit*), which initially opposed proponents and opponents of radical historicization, had already contributed to shifting the debate since it was no longer so much a matter of questioning the use of history as of delimiting its use against any positivist drift. Through his project of refunding historical science in line with Kantian criticism, Johann Gustav Droysen had already attempted to found a new discipline, the *Historik* (1857), to rigorously redefine its limits and presuppositions. His primary aim was thus to rid historical science of Ranke's objectifying postulate, but more generally of any teleological approach, still perceptible in the Rankean theophany. Openly criticizing Ranke's objectivist realism, he proposed to bring back the "past as it was" aimed at by Ranke to the mechanisms of a hermeneutical constitution that underlie it. Using the "critical method" systematized in the *Historik*, Droysen thus drew the first lines of demarcation with natural sciences, to protect historical science from any intrusion of positivism. Although the work was received late in its abbreviated form as the *Grundriss*, it had little impact on official historiography at the time, but it would come to inspire the next generation, from Wilhelm Dilthey to the Baden Neo-Kantians, who set out to completely rethink and refund the field of historical sciences.

Indeed, this debate reached its peak at the end of the century through the so-called Lamprecht dispute (*Lamprechtstreit*), a polemic with considerable repercussions. Claiming to be a historical materialist in the tradition of Marx, Karl Lamprecht, then a professor in Leipzig called for an in-depth reform of the historical method to catch up with the advance and progression of natural sciences, which were then in full expansion. As he put it, only by explaining historical events based on their regularities and recurrent structures could historical science gain in accuracy and scientificity. To gain in scientificity, the "objective materialism" he advocated aimed at to demystify and expose the still idealistic and transcendent presuppositions that still burden Rankean historiography. The attention paid to the empirical fact could not nevertheless suffice, in his opinion, to attest to the

objectivity of historical knowledge and its capacity to access “what really was.” It had to be supported more radically by research on its conditions of possibility, through the exposure of economic, social, and cultural factors. It was then to replace Ranke’s slogan “what really happened” (*wie ist es eigentlich gewesen*) with the question “how it happened” (*wie ist es eigentlich geworden*). Without surprise this call to reform historical science was immediately perceived as an attack on the historical profession, leading to the famous “Lamprecht dispute.” More than a simple methodological quarrel, it was at that time a substantial divergence of worldviews (*Weltanschauungstreit*) opposing two conceptions of history: On the one hand, the traditional model of *historia rerum gestarum*, an event-based history which, according to Lamprecht, proceeds in a “static and descriptive” manner, contenting itself with identifying facts and events which it elevates to the rank of universal; on the other hand, an approach that advocates for tracing facts and events back to the causes and contexts which underlie them and, through the use of statistics and the identification of causal laws, claims to reveal structural regularities likely to be considered as laws of historical evolution. Threatening to undermine the established historiography, his critique was not as successful as expected and, on the contrary, reinforced the objectivist approach advocated by Ranke and his successors, which continued to dominate in Germany until the end of the Second World War. Far from marking the end of the Rankean approach, of what Leo Strauss calls “theoretical historicism” (Strauss, 1965: 32), Lamprecht’s approach ultimately proved to be counterproductive, and the dominant historiography was strengthened. Critical of the Hegelian philosophy of history, historical science was then mainly characterized by a critical approach to sources, the use of strict causality as the basis of the historical narrative, the belief in an objective reconstruction of the past, and a resolutely empirical orientation. In his *Handbook of Historical Method* published in 1889 and internationally renowned manual for generations of historians, Ernst Bernheim indeed praised Ranke’s work as the genesis of history in the modern sense.

The subsequent denigration of Lamprecht’s “scientist” approach ultimately backfired and reinforced the conservative positions of mainstream historiography, at the same time as it delayed interest in the “social” in Germany at least until the work of Weber. As Jaeger and Rüsen have pointed out, in the long term, the possibility of a real alternative “was thus prevented rather than supported by the quarrel initiated by Lamprecht” (Jaeger and Rüsen, 1992: 146). By questioning the relevance of the Rankean methodological paradigm and drawing the historian’s attention to “collective social phenomena,” Lamprecht could nevertheless be seen as a precursor of the new cultural history or the history of mentalities as it was later implemented by the *Annales* school in France. In Germany, however, he continued to be a source of concern, as his historicism was no longer an obstacle to positivism. For its emancipation from the still speculative, metaphysical, or transcendental claims of historical science, historicism thus paid the price of submission to the naturalistic epistemological model. It was in the shadow of this quarrel that positions hardened on this

question of positivism. The priority was subsequently to find safeguards to protect the historical sciences from methodological positivism, to reestablish its field by offering it its own methodology, and to guarantee its autonomy from exact and positive sciences.

Initially appearing in jurisprudence, the so-called method dispute (Methodenstreit) thus quickly crystallized the problem, methodological at first, which historicism soon came up against, a problem that became omnipresent in the last third of the nineteenth century. Dilthey's position is even more interesting here as he drew inspiration from Kant, in the tradition of德罗森, toward a complete refoundation of the "historical" sciences. As he did in his Introduction to the Human Sciences (1883), it was a matter of proceeding to a strict critical delimitation of their domain, on the model of that established by Kant for the natural sciences. The challenge was then to reconcile the relativity of the necessary empirical approach imposed on these disciplines while recognizing the possibility of access to a form of scientific objectivity, different from that of the causal and deterministic natural sciences. The strict differentiation between the natural sciences and the Humanities thus gradually became the safeguard that made it possible to escape the naturalistic positivism that threatened the historical sciences or, as the expression used at the time, the "Geisteswissenschaften" (Humanities).

Testifying to the progressive historicization of the sciences throughout the nineteenth century, historicism underwent a real crisis after the First World War, shifting the debate from questions of method to an ethical and practical questioning that was supposed to provide new reference points and orientations in a world in shambles. Marked by the trauma of 1914–8, the interwar period was characterized by the development of new trends and currents that sought to wipe out the past and to envision and prepare the future. Considered as responsible for the crisis and the moral decline perceptible after the war, historicism was equated with relativism and skepticism, endangering the moral and cultural reconstruction necessary after the disaster of the First World War. Still its supporters and advocates chose to retaliate by re-evaluating its heritage and reception, claiming reflexivity that would, on the contrary, enable them to get out of the crisis. Through what Ernst Troeltsch called the "crisis of historicism," the third inflection in the history of historicism thus marked a major turning point and a broadening of the perspective toward practical and broader ethical issues. The crisis of historicism in the 1920s was not only an institutional crisis, with anti-historicist currents opposing the historicization of their respective fields, and an epistemological crisis, with the need for a refoundation of the Humanities, but also a profound crisis undermining "all thought concerning man, his culture, his values" (Troeltsch, 1961: 102). More broadly, this crisis witnessed discussions about the consequences of the historical turn, and in particular, about the extent to which the relativization induced by this all-out historicization could be overcome through historical reflexivity. At the end of the century, debates on historicism quickly took the form of debates on relativism and universalism. The recognition of the historicity of all things also implied their inscription in a determined historical context, period, culture, nation, and thus their relativity. Many of its

detractors, from the beginning of the century, underlined the dilemma and the internal contradiction of historicism: by affirming the relativity of all things, historicism would thus be led to deny itself, its thesis destroying itself by asserting itself as a permanent truth. Historicism was caught in an unsurpassable internal self-contradiction. As the various fields became historicized, the question of the relativity of their achievements, their objectivity and scientific validity became increasingly acute. Its detractors unreservedly equated historicism with relativism and skepticism, which endangered the moral and cultural reconstruction necessary after the disaster of the First World War.

The fixation on the "problem of historicism," to use Ernst Troeltsch's expression, during the interwar period led to radically opposed solutions, from the reaffirmation of transhistorical values allowing to escape from relativism, to attempts to redefine scientific objectivity, and to scores of metaphysical resurgences. In philosophy, this crisis gave rise to major confrontations. Some, like Dilthey or Nietzsche, sought to radically embrace the movement of historicism; others "neutralized" its corrosive implications, either through a vigorous critique of skepticism, as Husserl did or through the project of a logic of historical sciences pursued by Neo-Kantians (Windelband, Rickert). This was often accompanied by a pure and simple neutralization of history, based on a strict distinction between the positivist natural sciences and human sciences, which was supposed to allow the maintenance of "omni-temporal" idealities, overcoming the relativist objections of historicism and accessing a supra-historical normativity, like in the controversy between Husserl and Dilthey in 1911. Husserl then aimed at protecting the philosophical field from the relativistic danger represented by Diltheyan historicism. Although the conflict was particularly virulent in the theological field too, anti-historicism developed in all fields after the end of the war. Far from being reduced to the sole "dialectical" theology, known as "theology of crisis," which brought together actors as varied as Karl Barth, Friedrich Gogarten, and Paul Tillich, "anti-historicism" was part of a much broader movement of contestation which, alongside more moderate theological currents, brought together other trends, such as the new Husserlian phenomenology, the figure of Max Scheler and the George Circle. More than a unitary current of protest, anti-historicism thus came to channel the multiple dissatisfactions of an era of crisis, crystallizing reactions, most often anti-liberal, advocating a "Spiritual revolution" (Geistige Revolution) in the face of the crisis, the rise in power of bourgeois values, but also of the new democratic values to the point of psychologism. Marked by its anti-intellectualism and a declared hostility to the historical discipline, this movement of spiritual restoration had its advocates in the political field too, including in the following years some of the most virulent opponents of the Weimar Republic.

When Nietzsche explicitly criticized the hypertrophy and "disadvantages" of contemporary historiography of German culture and education in his second *Untimely Meditation* (1874), his target was not so much history as the Rankean approach and especially the conservative and commemorative history that he invited to liberate the "historical sense" from its scientist and objectivist constraint. He then proposed to "turn the spur of history against

itself" and on the contrary to assume this historicization and the risks entailed by the demystifying power of historical reflexivity. It was this gesture, which Ernst Troeltsch himself described as "the most radical overcoming of historicism from historicism itself" (Troeltsch, 1961: 309–10), that will inspire the entire postwar generation of historicists when it comes to finding in history itself the possibility of escaping relativism. Troeltsch's perspective is interesting as it attempts to question the so-called problem of historicism, namely the danger of relativization it implies, to rethink historical reflexivity in the sense of a reflexive and "renewed" historicism. Indeed, it is only by "'overcoming history through history," he wrote almost fifty years later, that it becomes possible to heal "the wounds inflicted by relativization" (Troeltsch, 1961: 772), namely by calling on our culture to reflect on itself to rediscover in history the values that constitute it and to draw new impulses from them. Based on this diagnosis, Troeltsch's analysis thus led to what he called a new "cultural synthesis" that aimed to recovering human values and traditions. The "reflexive" or "second-degree" historicism he advocated was supposed to be able to counter relativism without denying the radical historicity of all things. Like the relativist, the historicist certainly recognizes the irreconcilable plurality of norms and values, but he does not go so far as to assert their separation or incompatibility in the name of insurmountable differences. As Leo Strauss pointed out, historicism does indeed stem in this sense "from a non skeptical tradition—from that modern tradition which tried to redefine the limits of human knowledge and which therefore admitted that, within certain limits, genuine knowledge is possible" (Strauss, 1965: 20). The "problem of historicism" thus rapidly crystallized in the 1920s around the question of a possible "overcoming of history through history." The solution Troeltsch proposed consisted, in other words, of assuming the bias of his position, and in particular in this case the postwar crisis context. This allowed him to rethink relativism in the light of modernity in crisis and to see in the self-reflexivity of modern historical consciousness a means to overcome it. From this perspective, the question remained to what extent it was possible to accept relativity, contingency, and pluralism without giving in to a relativistic position. In his wake, Karl Mannheim, Karl Heussi, and Friedrich Meinecke attempted to extend and widen Troeltsch's diagnosis in several essays and books, "Historicism" (1924), *The Crisis of Historicism* (1932), *The Birth of Historicism* (1936), which will have a decisive impact on the subsequent meaning of the term and contribute to a debate that will be at the front-stage until the Second World War.

In his work *The Crisis of Historicism* (1932), Karl Heussi set himself the task of taking stock of historicism' in order to "see in what way the great spiritual crises we have experienced in recent decades has caused it to stagger or, on the contrary, has led to its decisive transformation" (Heussi, 1932: V). By the time he wrote, belief in objective history had been dispelled, leaving room for conflicts of interpretations, relativism, and positivist drift. This was, according to him, the impasse to which historical positivism leads, testifying of the obvious failure of historicism. Almost two generations later, Heussi subscribed to Nietzsche's critics of the established historiography: positivism had led to the abandonment

of all practical considerations, resulting in a crisis that would continue to grow until the postwar years in Germany. This view was to dominate until the early 1970s, as Reinhart Koselleck reported:

The crisis of historicism that Heussi observed after the First World War has become more pronounced. It seems that after the Second World War it is no longer just a crisis of the historical worldview, a relativism reproduced ad infinitum: [...] It is our science which, as such, is called into question. Clearly, the crisis of history depends on the crisis of historicism insofar as historical science is founded in historicism.

---(Koselleck, 2010: 32)

The defense of historicism by the sociologist Karl Mannheim, in his famous essay "Historicism" (1924), is one of the most radical in this respect. In the tradition of Troeltsch, he proposed a positive re-evaluation of historicism, which would involve an unparalleled reflexivity and reflect "the level of consciousness we have reached about ourselves." The interest of his perspective was to propose an alternative reading of the history of historicism that would not only compete with the naturalist philosophy, dominant in the positive sciences but would replace it, leading to the progressive disappearance of naturalist ontology. According to him, historicism thus stems from a double desacralization: first, the desacralization of Christian transcendence, and then of its secularized form, as maintained through the Hegelian philosophy of history, which was progressively destitute in the nineteenth century. It is precisely this movement that he proposed to radicalize, ridding historicism of its relativistic consequences in favor of what he called an assumed "perspectivism" (Perspektivismus). What he means by "perspectivism" is not, however, a subjective bias, but rather must be seen as constitutive of all knowledge, insofar as it is always linked to a certain context. And it is precisely by pushing historical reflexivity to its limit that it becomes possible not only to relativize historicism but also to make explicit the ideological presuppositions that underlie it. By uncovering these "pre-theoretical backgrounds," as he called them, it was then possible to relativize the alleged theoretical overhang of its detractors and thus to free historicism from the criticism directed at it. As he argued, the rejection of historicism, while seeking to "escape a threatening relativism and secure a firm point" (Mannheim, 1964: 300), led to no other way than to take refuge in a transcendent and ahistorical position.

If the interest of Troeltsch's position was to lead "a merciless fight against the pure relativism produced by historical thought," it was in a similar vein that Friedrich Meinecke proposed an alternative genealogy to revalue historicism against the often excessive criticism that is made of it. In his numerous essays, and more particularly in his work *Historicism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook* (1936), he proposed in his turn to re-evaluate German intellectual history to save historicism from the radical criticism it received, particularly from Lamprecht. While his detractors point to the relativistic, even nihilistic consequences, this criticism would ultimately concern, according to Meinecke, only what he calls "the flattened and burnt-out historicism of the early 19th and 20th centuries," which

would itself be only a stunted and declining form. According to his definition, historicism should, on the contrary, refer to "one of the greatest spiritual revolutions that Western thought has experienced" (Meinecke, 1965) with the advent of the modern world, from Leibniz to the death of Goethe, a movement to which the German spirit would have given its letters of nobility. Far from reducing it to a method specific to the humanities, a vision of the world, or a specific current, Meinecke thus offers historicism a new definition that goes far beyond the meanings that were hitherto linked to its concept. Just as for Troeltsch it refers to the emergence of new political and social conditions brought about by what he called "the fundamental historicization of our knowledge and thought." It was this development of the modern world that Meinecke intended to highlight by tracing its emergence from the second half of the eighteenth century onward, testifying to a gradual "denaturalization" and "de-theologization" in favor of modern ideas of individuality and evolution. As a "historian of historicism" Meinecke thus made a major contribution to the meaning of the term and redefined drastically the framework of the controversy in the postwar period. However, what still made sense in the interwar period was soon to become an anachronism. In the face of totalitarian barbarism, the illusion was brutally disproved, cutting short the optimism of revival of the 1930s. Although Meinecke still saw historicism in 1942 as "a star that could enlighten us so as not to lose our way in the ephemeral tribulations and the atmosphere of crisis" (Meinecke, 1959: 202), historicism was soon to appear in these postwar years as an obsolete and definitely out of fashion concept.

The history of the term in the architectural and artistic field follows, so to speak, a parallel development. Driven by the growing interest in the past, the progressive and then omnipresent development of historical research since the beginning of the nineteenth century, historicism also led, from 1850 onward to a vast movement which, breaking with classicism, intended to draw inspiration freely from the past and the history of architectural and artistic movements. Initially driven by the Romantic movement, its fascination with medieval history and art, Gothic art, but also Orientalism, the historicist craze gradually became the dominant trend on the eve of the First World War in Germany and throughout the Victorian period in the UK. Unlike the neoclassical or romantic "revivals," the aim was not to imitate or repeat a previous style, but to invent, through a mixture of styles, a completely new style, initially freely inspired, then gradually codified, leading to strict stylistic canons, supported and legitimized by historical and scientific advances. As in other fields, historicism reached its peak in the 1880s, a period marked by the effervescence generated by the Industrial Revolution and the affirmation of a bourgeois class eager to invent new models and create its style, drawing on a past that it was trying to appropriate symbolically. Fundamentally eclectic, even experimental, this new style recovered and brought together various influences, notably German, Bavarian, Russian, or Scandinavian, borrowing and mixing styles as diverse as the Italian Umberto style, the French Louis-Philippe and Napoleon III styles, the Maximilian style in Bavaria, the Neo-Romanesque (Rundbogenstil) trend in Germany and the Neo-Renaissance style. The latter gradually became the dominant style, supplanting the Neo-Gothic style, which had previously been

preferred by the middle of the century. Foreign styles and elements were also introduced, such as Neo-Byzantine, Neo-Moorish, and Neo-Mauritanian, feeding the fascination for the East that characterized this period. Making modern construction with replicas and ancient references, reinterpreting the past "in the manner of" according to contemporary canons, historicism thus sought to mix styles, embodying modernity that aimed to assert its openness and syncretic character. Nevertheless, the historicist movement was quickly supplanted at the beginning of the twentieth century by the emerging Art Nouveau and other functionalist currents concerning with detaching themselves from the past and integrate more recent developments from industrial art, as Art Deco, local style (Heimatstil), or claiming a specific cultural or regional identity. It is interesting to note that, in countries that suffered from the war, the first-world conflict put a definitive end to historicism in favor of less artificial currents when it came to rebuilding the ruined postwar world. Nevertheless, historicism continued to develop until the 1950s, in the unaffected countries, in the United States, but also in Spain and Switzerland.

Importance Today: Toward a New Historicism?

While transfers from one field to another are part of the history of historicism itself, it is also interesting to look at subsequent transfers, particularly geographical ones, and to identify further semantic shifts that are not without interest for the understanding the issues at stake. The differences in the reception of historicism from one country to another have been very marked. In France, a certain disinterest in the theory of history, the absence of a tradition such as *Historik*, of which there is no equivalent, and the absence, with a few exceptions, of a real dialogue between philosophy and history, is enough to explain the virtual absence of reception. The overall trend has been that of a certain distrust or critical distance, as in the case of Marc Bloch or Fernand Braudel, fueled by the rejection of German science, except for Raymond Aron's highly historicizing approach. The case of Italy is more interesting in this respect, nourished by the tradition of the *Storismo assoluto* of Benedetto Croce. During the interwar period, Croce claimed to be an absolute historicist, which was rather anachronistic given the history of the concept. In the tradition of Giambattista Vico, he proposed to develop a philosophy of history that would limit the Hegelian dialectic and transform the speculative approach into "absolute immanentism." Based on a vehement critique of metaphysics as an abstract science or "pure philosophy" incapable of explaining reality, he nevertheless rejected positivism as being incapable of grasping the rationality of the development of the Spirit. His philosophy was both a metaphysics of the spirit and science of reality, no longer based on the idea of an end to history or a transcendent finality, but rather on the infinite development of the human Spirit, entirely fulfilled in reality and actual history. Beyond Croce and nourished by his reception of and interest in German thought, Italy has produced in this lineage some of the most eminent specialists in German historicism. We can mention Pietro Rossi, who introduced Dilthey and Weber in Italy in the postwar period, but above all Fulvio Tessitore,

undeniably one of the best Italian specialists of Friedrich Meinecke, who was able to develop a team working on historicism at the University of Naples Federico II, bringing in his wake numerous disciples, such as Giuseppe Cacciatore.

Finally, in the traditionally empiricist British academia, historicism did not need to conquer its legitimacy, as was the case in Germany throughout the nineteenth century. Paradoxically, it was Robin George Collingwood who coined the term historicism at the end of the Second World War to designate his approach, although he presented himself more as an opponent than a proponent of historicism, in the German sense. However, it was Karl Popper's work that became most important after the war, with his famous book *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957), not without misunderstandings. Popper came to counter the entire German tradition without caution by emphasizing finalism rather than the relativistic pitfall as such. Translated into French in 1960, Popper's work very quickly overshadowed Raymond Aron's more informed reading on it, contributing not only to its reception in France, where the translation of the term "historicism" was favored but also to the fact that it came into common usage at the detriment of the translation of the German term (*Historismus*). Leo Strauss was the first to point out the misunderstandings of the Popperian reading, which he set out to rectify by attacking the real adversary, historical relativism, the nihilistic outcome of historicism, which he intended to combat by rehabilitating the idea of natural law in his work *Natural Right and History* (1953).

Surprisingly, just as interest in the concept was disappearing in Germany as a result of post-Second World War self-criticism, it emerged on the other side of the Atlantic, particularly in Anglo-American universities, and to a lesser extent in certain British universities. It was not until the late 1970s and 1980s that a new trend claiming to be New Historicism developed at the initiative of the new school of American literary criticism. This historiographical current which applied to the literary field considered that any literary work was embedded in its context, and should be analyzed in the light of the social, ideological, and political circumstances in which it was born. This form of literary theory thus approached literature through its historical and cultural context, emphasizing social and ideological configurations, but also, in line with the Foucauldian reading, on power relations. One of the pioneers, Stephen Greenblatt advocated a critical approach to literature that he calls "Poetics of Culture" in the tradition of what was called "Cultural Poetics" in the 1950s. In his work on the English Renaissance, he and several colleagues, including Catherine Gallagher, Louis Montrose, Aram Veesser, Don E. Wayne, Alan Sinfield, Leonard Tennenhouse, and others, proposed to revisit the period from a literary studies perspective. Shakespeare's work, which was an early example of a new historical sensibility by revealing the mechanisms of power at work in Elizabethan English society, provided the ideal material. This approach elicited interest and gradually took hold in the 1990s in the literature departments of Anglo-American universities, particularly at the University of California at Berkeley, where Greenblatt taught, and which quickly became the epicenter of the movement. Furthermore, the movement gave rise to several journals, like *English*

Literary Renaissance, Representations or Journal of Literature Teaching Politics, and collections such as "The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics," also published by the University of California. More distanced from the Foucauldian approach, other academics, such as Jerome McGann, who was more inspired by the hermeneutic approach, joined this vast movement of historicization in literary studies.

This new approach opposed not only the romantic idea of a *sui generis* creation and autonomy of the literary text but also the traditional contextualist criticism that tended to see the work as a mere reflection of historical conditions. Not only is historicity recognized as constitutive of the text itself, which prohibits the search for a transcendent or invariant meaning from one period to another, but the text itself is considered as a social production on its own. Louis Montrose summarizes this by characterizing the purpose of New Historicism as a double work, on "the historicity of texts and the textuality of history." By considering that the text is itself a producer of meaning, New Historicism operates a shift, not without consequence, from the textual object to the specific cultural context to which it gives us access. Conversely, it is culture itself that now functions on the model of a text to be deciphered and interpreted, and from which it would be possible to extract a "poetics," or "cultural poetics" to use Greenblatt's expression and to understand its rules. Literature, but also any work of art, is then no longer just a historical object, but more broadly a cultural object to be explored in the same way as anthropologists do with indigenous populations. The difficulty of accessing the past and its singularity is equivalent here to the ethnologist's work of interpretation to go beyond his own cultural boundaries. Assimilating historical difference to cultural difference, New Historicism thus joins the theses of certain ethnologists, such as Clifford Geertz, to whom Greenblatt refers, or certain theorists of postcolonialism, such as Tzvetan Todorov or Edward Said. Apart from the fact that it emphasizes the text's historicity and its radical strangeness, the interest of this approach lies in revealing to the reader, through a mirror effect, its own historicity. The risk, however, is that the critical gesture ends up in the deconstruction of the literary object and, under the pretext of demystifying the creative gesture by revealing its mechanisms, reduces it to its sole ideological dimension. The influence of Foucault, invited to Berkeley in the framework of the Howison Lectures in Philosophy in 1980, is considerable here, as New Historicism is based precisely on his conception of knowledge and culture as a force of control and domination induced by power.

In addition to Foucault's work, that of Hayden White undoubtedly fed the deconstructivism and skepticism of new historicists toward the great historical narratives or syntheses. By showing that historical narratives could be read as textual constructions and by highlighting their narrative mechanisms, White had himself set in motion, from the 1970s onward, a vast movement to demystify the historical discipline. As the historical counterpart to New Historicism, he set about the opposite movement of rereading historical texts as literary fictions or "plots," themselves determined by specific rhetorical procedures according to the periods. Bringing history and rhetoric together, as White does, is not only a way of

returning history to its premodern status as a branch of rhetoric. But it also raises the question of the degree of objectivity that historical science can achieve, which amounts to questioning the scientificity of the historical method. The aim of a historian like Hayden White was however not so much to challenge the veracity of historical accounts as to nourish the historian's reflexive view of his work. As he pointed out, Greenblatt and his colleagues went much further in this sense, to the point of questioning the very legitimacy of the historical discipline. He therefore distanced himself from New Historicism, judging its approach too radical. Like fictional writing, he argued, historiography is indeed a genre of narrative. But this does not mean that it is only narrative. Rather, it is a mixture of fact and fiction, of effects of reality and links to reality, in a constant shift from the real place to the staging that takes place as soon as it is accessed through a discourse. This is a red line that other historians sympathetic to New Historicism (Ankersmit, Jenkins) or supporters of constructivism (Anderson, Hobsbawm) would not cross either.

In the Future: Relativistic Drifts of Historicization

Viewed in this way the New Historicism approach is not only critical and demystifying, but deconstructive, and inevitably leads, from an epistemological point of view, to a skeptical position. In the eyes of the new historicists, this skepticism would thus attest to the failure of modern historical science to attain a degree of objectivity and scientificity comparable to that of the natural sciences. We can see here to what extent the Popperian definition is once again at the antipodes of what historicism claims to be, even in this extreme, deconstructivist and postmodern version. Through this approach, New Historicism leads not only to an epistemological skepticism but, and this has been the stumbling block since the turn of the twentieth century, to moral relativism. The questioning of the boundaries between what is "real" and what is imaginary or fictional, putting history and literature on the same level, thus challenges the canons and claims of modern historiography. More radically, it is also the very possibility of accessing reality that is at stake.

New Historicism was also influenced by the work of historians, such as Dominick LaCapra. Drawing from Derrida and Bakhtin, LaCapra emphasized the phenomena of subversion and the gap or ambivalence between practices and discourses within the same period of time. If any epoch is characterized by heterogeneity and plurality, by the tensions and contradictory character of the multiple voices that are expressed within it, then it becomes impossible for the historian not only to access it. This conception calls into question the very idea of an epoch and the very possibility of making a common world. Historicism in the broadest sense does not deny that as soon as there is historicization, there is relativization, in the sense that any text, event, or cultural product inevitably depends on the context from which it comes. In its postmodern version, New Historicism questions and relativizes its own standpoint, thus eliminating the last bastion that separates it from relativism. In such a conception, not only are there no longer any safeguards to attest to the truth or veracity of the historical narrative in relation with a reality that would be independent of it. But the

new historicist does not have more skills to understand his own time and perspective, nor to relate it to what he is studying. The multiple transformations, mutations, and incessant changes, but also ambivalences, distortions, and subversions would prevent the consolidation of meaning, resulting in a totally "liquid" conception of the world, to use Baumann's expression. As Paul Hamilton has pointed out, despite their opposition to Romanticism, "the truth remains that the new historicists of today, although for reasons we may find much more morally congenial, do the same to those colonizing, Romantic mystifiers" (Hamilton, 2003: 150). Despite their refusal of any essentialism, notably of the same human nature, which would remain invariable according to the times, the "Renaissance New Historicism" would finally fall into the same trap precisely because of "the Foucauldian strategies at work" in their works. In this sense, it becomes impossible for the literary critic, the historian, or the anthropologist, who is in a way a prisoner of his own world, to step out of his context and understand a universe that would remain alien to him. Pushed to its limits, cultural relativism thus feeds a totally compartmentalized and ultimately deterministic vision of society. Despite the constant refusal of any transhistorical or universalist approach, New Historicism then leads to the paradox that makes it fall into the very essentialism that it denounces, and that historicism fought against from its very beginning.

If relativism remains, quite rightly, a real bone of contention at the beginning of the twenty-first century and an undoubtedly anxiety-provoking pitfall, the exploration of historicity since the 1980s, particularly in the wake of Reinhart Koselleck's work on temporality and the different regimes of historicity, is currently experiencing an unprecedented boom. In the historical field, the exposure of the historicity of concepts, through the monumental project of a dictionary of fundamental historical concepts (*Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*), carried out for nearly thirty years with Otto Brunner and Werner Conze (1972), has profoundly marked the historiographical field. Extended beyond the Germany, it also nourished a wider reflection on the various cultural transfers, notably semantic, from one cultural area to another, opening up hitherto unexplored fields. This deepening and exploration of historical reflexivity nourished the radicalization of historicism that began two centuries ago and opens up new perspectives that history, like anthropology just began to explore. Contemporary historicism, like certain currents that claim to be part of it (contextualism, perspectivism, etc.), continues in this sense in the vein of the historical turn that has been one of the most prominent defining feature of modernity. This has been the critical shift that allowed modern consciousness to become aware of itself and its presuppositions ceasing to relate contingency to a transcendent authority. "Philosophie der Geschichte nach dem Ende der Geschichtsphilosophie," to use Baumgartner's expression (Baumgartner 1987), the "renewed" historicism that German philosophers and historians called for during the interwar period, continues to be in line with the emancipatory ideal inherited from the Enlightenment. Faced with the fluidity of the world and the increasing acceleration of change, turning to the past, far from being merely a refuge or an escape, thus became one of the main recourses, and rather a formidable one, for gaining a better

knowledge of ourselves, and protecting what we have in common. In the absence of a unifying narrative or transcendent framework to hold on to, it is therefore not insignificant that the debate now tends to continue and shift to the terrain of memory, as we can see in the face of the blows of the recent practice of cancel culture, in line with the postmodern and relativistic positions inherited from New Historicism.

Conclusion

Historicism is inseparable from its history, marking both a turning point and a fundamental moment in the history of science, through the emergence and progressive imposition of the historical method in all fields. It is therefore not only a much-debated subject in the field of historical sciences, but also an approach that has profoundly changed the field of knowledge since the end of the eighteenth century, provoking a real “historical turn” in most disciplines, which were led to redefining their foundations and aims. Imposing new dividing lines, leading to some mutations in the approach and the very purpose of these disciplines, historicization profoundly disrupted their foundations, causing an integral reconfiguration of scientific fields and methods. On the other hand, historicism has been confronted with multiple resistances that this intrusion of historical consciousness, this “intrusive character of history” (*Die Audringlichkeit der Geschichte*), to use Hermann Lübke’s expression, encountered as it permeated different fields. A fundamentally polemical concept initially used to attack the adversary, historicism established itself through heated debates and intense intellectual battles (*Methodenstreit*, *Lamprechtstreit*, *Werturteilstreit*, etc.). From the German Historismus to the Hegelian-Marxist historicism criticized by Popper, via the Italian storicismo assoluto, historicism in the field of architecture and, more recently, New Historicism, it is therefore not possible to reduce its various meanings, as Popper or some of his critics have done, to a deterministic version of Hegelianism nor mere positivism. It is only when historicism is put into perspective along with the sharp reactions it provoked in a complex and polemical history that the concept makes sense.

In this sense, historicism is a valuable indicator of the “historical turn” taken by most disciplines in the nineteenth century. Forced to redefine their very field and foundations under the impact of historization and the subsequent criticism of it, most disciplines underwent a profound reorganization, not only methodological but also disciplinary and institutional. While historical science was becoming professionalized and institutionalized, the historical method was gradually imposed on jurisprudence, political economy, and theology, and this not without encountering resistance, as evidenced by the heated debates and the critique addressed to a young historical school that was then in full expansion and on the way to dominate the academic world. As the controversies unfolded, currents claiming to be historicist or being fought as such have therefore successively been assimilated to the excesses of the historical science, to the reductionism of positivism and, later, according to the interpretation that would dominate after the First World War, to

relativism and the resulting scepticism. Through these different forms and polysemic shifts, everything leads us to see the major stages of the vast movement of progressive historicization that has characterized the last two centuries. Emerging from this "time of revolutions," which challenged and destabilized the ancient understanding of the world supported by the reference to a transcendent order, historicism attests the subversive character of this new situation. As a legacy of the critical tradition, it is undoubtedly the tangible evidence of the growing reflexivity of modern consciousness which is gradually being led to reappropriate its own conditions of possibility. This turn towards history would then progressively fuel the contestation of the order that until then had dominated, based on the stability of an immutable system of power and social hierarchy, and cause its gradual decline. Compensating for the uncertainty of the future and the loss of reference points, interest in the past thus fueled this shift toward historical research in all fields, becoming the main guarantor of a stability that had been undermined by the revolutions. It took almost two centuries for historicism to become a mainstream approach, both in the field of the human sciences, where it is no longer questioned and, more generally, in the awareness that we now live in an entirely in a radically historical world.

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