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LEOPOLD VON RANKE AND EMPIRICISM (1795-1886)

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Ranke is the best historian since Gibbon and is the greatest historian Germany has produced, not excepting Mommsen. At the university he studied philosophy and theology. By temperament and choice, he took to History. He was an ardent student of Scott who amused him for a while but nature given to detachment from bias. He said that general historians and secondary sources are undependable and so archival and other documents must be used and indicated. He wrote the history of Germany, England, Prussia, France, histories of war, biographies etc. His complete works comprise 54 volumes. His "History of Popes" is the best and best known of his works. 'It was not only a great achievement of historical research but a work of art'. In 1880 when he 85 years old he informed his publishers of new work on universal history; 'the world was astounded at the audacity of an octogenarian sitting down to such a task. Seven volumes were issued before he died and the story was brought down to Henry IV. Some of his last dictated words are a justification of Carlyle: 'General tendencies alone do not decide; great personalities are always necessary to make them effective'.

Gooch sums up Ranke's services to history as follows: He divorced the study of the past as humanly possible from the passions of the present. He stressed the necessity of founding historical Construction on strictly contemporary sources; authorities, contemporary or otherwise, in the light of the author's temperament, affiliations and opportunity of knowledge and by comparison with the testimony of other writers. 'He was the greatest historical writer of modern times... He remains the master of us all. But Eduard Meyer severely criticized Ranke's universal History. He said, 'He lacked real preparation for his task. He had only occupied himself with antiquity in his youth, yet felt himself justified in virtually ignoring the scientific work of half a century. Justified in such circumstances the attempt could only issue in total failure. His much vaunted objectivity was also somewhat limited in view of his undue enthusiasm for Luther, the Hohenzollerns and Prussia. But he was not unrealistic in his call for objectivity but 'He said. 'don't bring up the argument that it is not possible to be objective. It is a known fact... But try to be more objective. He strongly disproved of historical fictions in whatever form they might be brought up, and romantic histories, he would not exempt even Scott from the charge of corrupting history. His view was that while it is a gain for fiction writing, it is a loss for history. It was Ranke's privilege to have made history an autonomous discipline. Ranke is the foremost historian of Germany, who inaugurated a new era in the historiography and who has been rightly called the father or Columbus of modern history.

He was greatly influenced by the novels of Walter Scott. Ranke is generally regarded as the first of the modern historians. His scholarly method and way of teaching had a powerful influence not only on the German academic life but also on that of England and USA. At the beginning Ranke took no interest in history and he called it 'an endless number of barren notices'. But Niebuhr's "Roman History" turned his interest towards history. Intellectual curiosity and the desire for reliable information finally made him the leading historian of the 19th century. He began a systematic study of the classical historians, Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Livy, Tacitus etc., and influenced by Walter Scott. When a new emphasis was being on historical change, historians began to insist upon a new precision of documentation. At the head of this new tradition of critical method stands Niebuhr who wrote the "History of Rome" which inaugurated modern historical methodology. Rank was explicitly following methodology, and Niebuhr's Roman history turned a new leaf in Ranke's mind. Rank displayed an amazing detachment, rare objectivity and enormous respect for accuracy. Truth was more attractive to him than fiction. He was also aware that environment influenced ideas, but was deeply romantic and genuinely religious. He united the 18th century concept of Universal history with the Romantic doctrine of individualism and organic development. His characteristic quality appears in his declaration of war on the moralizing and utilitarian history of the enlightenment. He tries to discover how things really were but fits his empirical analyses into a personal view of the Universe.

He opposed vehemently the Utilitarian history of the Enlightenment and established the technique of knowing exactly as they had happened. He strongly opposed the patriotic prejudices and determined not to be misled by the prevailing theories like Hegelianism, Liberalism, Romanticism and Positivism. He was the first person to apply the method of critical study of the sources. Ranke's general notion about the task of the historian is 'to show what actually happened'. For Ranke each period of history has its own individual features. It is unique. Each period, almost each history has its own individual features. It is unique. Each period, almost each historical phenomenon, reflects a distinctive 'idea'. His own deeply religious feeling, his romantic enthusiasm for the 'abyss of individuality' as well as platonic influences, all combined to form Ranke's view of the role of 'ideas' in history. Ranke tried to give, with the help of scrupulous methodology an objective account of the past, secondly, he tried to divorce the study of the past from the passions of the present and insisted that the strict presentation of facts is the supreme law of historical writing. Thirdly, Ranke developed the science of evidence. In short, Ranke's critical method became the model of historical research in the 19th century in Germany and the wider world. Ranke made some novel contributions to the writing of history; The unity of the Romano-Germanic world, in which the western community of the Latin and Germanic people formed a vital link. His book "History of Latin and Teutonic Nations" argues that western civilization is the synthesis of Roman and Germanic elements. Ranke presented altogether a new technique of writing history based on penetrating criticism of historical sources which inaugurated modern era in historiography. Ranke proved that the general histories were virtually useless as sources and that to avoid such irresponsible data, the historian must use an archives and original documents. Objective research was his goal with the purpose of apprehending historical phenomena as they actually were, without any pre-conceived inclinations or evaluations. The dominant forces in the course of history are revealed in the national and political individuality. Political history occupied the most prominent place in Ranke's works, while cultural and economic history remained in the back ground. Another main contribution of Ranke to history is in the realm of philosophy of history. He sees divine punishment in the shallow treatment of history and to him history is the proof of the divine being. He argues, "In all history God dwells, lives, is to be seen". Every deed demonstrates him, every moment in history preaches His name". It appears to Ranke as the continuity of history. In his another book, "History of the World", he vehemently attempted to show that the actors must be studied to discover the extent to which they express divine powers. The individuals and the nations are agents in a world movement. According to Ranke, the mediating powers connected between the God and the world are "ideas".

The "ideas" are "the thoughts of God in the World". "Ideas" are life giving, are life itself, are moral energies. Ranke says in the interaction of these 'ideas', in their coming and going, lies the great secret of history. His philosophy of history is to be derived only from a survey of all his works and not merely from his theoretical essays. Because he expressed his philosophic ideas better when he wrote history. Ranke always regarded historical development as the revelation of God. He never tried to experience this revelation mystically nor philosophically. He believed that men could merely have a pre-sentiment or inclination of the intervention of "Gods finger" or "divine impact" into man's destinies. Ranke became the father of "modern historicism". He believed firmly in Providence and an absolute system of ethical values. Ranke's philosophy of history is full of paradoxes. It is very difficult to believe, "God dwells in history" and he himself wanted to exclude himself being a priest in the service of truth. He rejected the theological, meta-physical and philosophical approach of other thinkers. Ranke's writings are as much saturated with religious values as perhaps those of St Augustine. To say God dwells in history is in no way less in force than to say that the "City of God" is far superior to the City of man. The state became for Ranke an ethical concept, a partner morally equal to the church. Ranke does not appear like scientific, he appears profoundly biased, because he supported the element of God in history. He is a defender of the church and state and he wished to see God standing in history. He tried to give a new meaning to historical thought but the young German scholars regarded him as a reactionary. The most valuable legacy is the conquest of historical relativism through his religious reverence and his highly personal knowledge and belief. Important works of Ranke are,

- History of the Popes
- History of the Reformation
- French History
- English History
- Prussian History (12 vol) He is for objectivity in history and he never believed gossip, hearsay, tradition, rumor.

He hated mystery and speculation and his main aim was a religious presentation of facts. Ranke argued that history has no final aim, it could be abstractly defined. It is not an ascending process in which the later period is superior to the earlier one. Ranke argued that it was incomprehensible that man could ever grasp God's Providential plan and he believed that history reveals the working of God by demonstrating the richness and variety of life. That is why he argued that 'each period is equally close to God'. Each period has its own individual features. It is unique as it reflects a distinctive idea. In his political view Ranke defended monarchy against revolution and he was against liberalism. So he was fundamentally conservative in spirit. Ranke was a great writer, and his books are not simple histories but works of literature. He had professionalized history and made history an academic subject which required specialized training and archival research. He started the process of editing the source material. This historical material revolutionized social sciences because a large number of fresh material was made available to all social sciences. Social research was indeed greatly fostered by the availability of this new data. Ranke's emphasis in regarding all periods of the past as equally important, opened a new line of thinking which broke barriers between various civilizational studies. Ranke regarded history as a science and also he developed a method of objective study of history. So Lord Acton called Ranke "Columbus of Modern history". Ranke is the high priest of 'historicism' which means that history determines each event but does not justify it.

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