

METHOD AND MEANING: RANKE AND DROYSEN ON THE HISTORIAN'S DISCIPLINARY ETHOS

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ABSTRACT

In this article I revisit nineteenth-century debates over historical objectivity and the political functions of historiography. I focus on two influential contributors to these debates: Leopold von Ranke and Johann Gustav Droysen. In their takes on objectivity and subjectivity, impartiality and political engagement, I reveal diametrically opposed solutions to shared concerns: how can historians reveal history to be meaningful without resorting to speculative philosophy? And how can they produce a knowledge that is relevant to the present when the project of “exemplary” history has been abandoned?

I focus especially on the relativist themes in Ranke's and Droysen's answers to these questions. Ranke's demand for impartiality leads him to think of all historical epochs as equally valid, whereas Droysen's emphasis on subjectivity relativizes historical truth. In order to explain why Ranke and Droysen nevertheless remained unfazed by the problem of historical relativism, I analyze their normative conceptions of the historian's disciplinary ethos. I show that Ranke and Droysen think of objective impartiality and subjective partiality not only in methodological terms but also in terms of justice and ethical duty. By way of this normative element, their historical methodologies secure for the professional study of history an ethical-political relevance for the present.

Keywords: German historicism, historical method, universal history, objectivity, hermeneutics, relativism

INTRODUCTION

The professionalization of German historiography in the early nineteenth century led to a shift in how historians understood their own work methodologically, as well as in how they conceptualized its political functions and broader social significance. On the one hand, the received conception of history as a *magistra vitae* was being challenged by the likes of August Ludwig Schlözer, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and Leopold von Ranke. The idea that history should serve as a repository of “examples” from which timely moral and political lessons could be drawn seemed incompatible with the scientific rigor of professional historical study. On the other hand, historians objected to what they deemed the oppressive habit of philosophers and theologians to impose unempirical, aprioristic schemes onto the historical process.

Ranke's call for an objective historiography offered an alternative to exemplary history, as well as to speculative philosophy of history. His proposed model of historical research gave the newly forming discipline a firm methodological grounding in archival work and the critical study of available sources.¹ But although his impressive historiographical oeuvre, as well as his teaching at the University of Berlin, secured for him a reputation as the "founding father" of modern historiography, Ranke's views on objectivity were less positively received.

The generation of historians that followed Ranke, most notably Johann Gustav Droysen, Heinrich von Sybel, and Heinrich von Treitschke, favored a much tighter connection between history and politics. As advocates of a "small-German" (*kleindeutsch*) solution to the problem of German unification, they rejected Ranke's ideal of objectivity on the grounds that it rendered historiography politically toothless, or worse, fostered a backwards conservatism of "historical right" (*historisches Recht*).² And although late nineteenth-century neo-Rankeans such as Erich Marcks and Max Lenz took up Ranke's "primacy of foreign policy" (*Primat der Außenpolitik*) in order to justify Germany's imperialist aspirations, they seemed less prepared to mimic his ideal of objectivity.³

In this article, I revisit the nineteenth-century debates over historical objectivity and the political functions of historiography. I focus on the opposition between two influential contributors to these debates: Ranke and Droysen. I analyze their views on how the historian ought to approach the past and the present: their normative accounts of the historian's disciplinary ethos.⁴ In Ranke's and Droysen's takes on objectivity and subjectivity, impartiality and political engagement, I reveal diametrically opposed solutions to the problems that arose in the wake of the professionalization of historical study: how can historians reveal human history to be a meaningful process without resorting to speculative philosophy? And how can they be relevant to the present, when the project of exemplary history has been abandoned?

Both Ranke and Droysen have been branded as relativists, which suggests that their answers to these problems are less than satisfactory.⁵ I thus put a special emphasis on investigating the relativist elements in both authors. As I will show, Ranke and Droysen had no reason to worry about relativism. The relativist themes

1. For a detailed reconstruction of Ranke's use of the archive, see Kasper R. Eskildsen, "Leopold Ranke's Archival Turn: Location and Evidence in Modern Historiography," *Modern Intellectual History* 5, no. 3 (2008), 425-453.

2. After the failed revolution of 1848, advocates of the "small-German" solution pushed for the unification of the German kingdoms under the leadership of Prussia and with the exclusion of Austria. Carl von Savigny and his historical school of law argued against national unification, in particular against the adoption of a unified *Code Civil*, on the grounds that it violated the "historical rights" that had grown organically in and out of the diverse German communities.

3. Hans-Heinz Krill, *Die Rankerenaissance: Max Lenz und Erich Marcks. Ein Beitrag zum historisch-politischen Denken in Deutschland 1880-1935* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1962).

4. My reconstruction is based primarily on Ranke's and Droysen's methodological and theoretical writings, although sometimes I will draw on passages from private correspondence when these prove helpful for illuminating their methodological views.

5. Georg Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1983); Herbert Schnädelbach, *Geschichtsphilosophie nach Hegel: Die Probleme des Historismus* (Freiburg: Alber, 1974); Hayden White, "Droysen's Historik: Historical Writing as a Bourgeois Science," in *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 83-103.

in their thinking ultimately bolstered their shared conviction that history has a meaning, that the historian can at least partly reveal this meaning, and that by doing so, he serves an ethical-political task.⁶

My article has six parts. The first three parts focus on Ranke. In the first part, I reveal his commitment to the goals of universal history by focusing on his dispute with Heinrich Leo. The second part deals with his conception of objectivity, and the third part shows that Ranke thought of objectivity as a disciplinary ethos that enabled the historian to find in history a politically relevant meaning. In the following sections, I deal with Droysen. The fourth part recapitulates Droysen's reasons for rejecting Ranke's ideal of objectivity, and the fifth details his own conception of universal history and his subjectivist epistemology of history. In the sixth part, I show that for Droysen subjective partiality enabled not just the representation of meaning in history, it also secured for historiography an ethical and political relevance for the present. I conclude with a comparison between the two authors and some reflections on the trajectory of German historicism and relativism in the nineteenth century.

I. RANKE ON THE UNIVERSAL IN THE PARTICULAR

The Prussian reform of the educational system under Wilhelm von Humboldt turned history from an "auxiliary science" (*Hilfswissenschaft*) in the service of law and theology to an autonomous academic discipline with its own methodological standards. This process of professionalization escalated the pre-existing conflict between philosophers and philologists over what was the adequate approach to understanding the human-historical world. When Ranke arrived at the University of Berlin, the field was divided between Hegel and his followers on the one hand, and Friedrich Schleiermacher and Carl von Savigny on the other. Ranke quickly found his home with the latter, developing a friendship with Schleiermacher.⁷ Whereas the proponents of the "historical school" argued that the study of history required the careful investigation of historical texts and documents, philosophers objected that the source-critical approach sacrificed too much: it lost track of the general and universal in human history.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's lectures on world history, which he delivered every other year from the winter term 1822/23 onwards, not only elaborate his interpretation of world history as the self-realization of freedom. In these lectures, Hegel also seeks to defend the philosophy of history against the charge of engaging in aprioristic construction. Hegel pushes two lines of argument against his critics.

6. In the following, I will use the male form throughout. Both Ranke and Droysen thought of the historian's disciplinary ethos in masculinist terms. They shared an androcentric perspective on history and the state, and the ideal historian that they conjured up had all the positive characteristics associated with male virtue and manliness. See Falko Schnicke, *Die männliche Disziplin: Zur Vergeschlechtlichung der deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft 1780–1900* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2015).

7. Ulrich Muhlack, "Das Problem der Weltgeschichte bei Leopold Ranke," in *Die Vergangenheit der Weltgeschichte. Universalhistorisches Denken in Berlin 1800–1933*. ed. W. Hardtwig and P. Müller (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2010).

First, he argues that there is no contradiction between the task of faithfully recapturing historical events and philosophy. Philosophy too has to proceed empirically, and conversely, even the most pedestrian of historians interprets the past on the basis of presupposed concepts.⁸ The only difference between philosophy of history and ordinary historiography, then, is that by reconstructing history from the standpoint of reason, philosophy starts from concepts that are neither subjective nor arbitrary. Second, Hegel sharply criticizes historians who seek to create a sense of “vividness” (*Anschaulichkeit*) by presenting the reader with a mass of historical details. Such particularities are often irrelevant for the general course of events, he argues, and vividness comes at the cost of losing sight of the unity and purpose of history.⁹

Heinrich Leo repeats this charge in a hostile review of Ranke’s debut *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker* (1824). He attacks Ranke for failing to adhere to his own ideal of source-criticism and ridicules his views on the workings of God in history. But his strongest complaint is that Ranke fails to address what is essential in history. “Of all sorts of curiosities, of an old law in an old manuscript, of protégés and Portuguese, of hunting enthusiasm and a dislike of baths and wine Mr. R tells us, where he promises to tell us of the founding of Spain. Does he not know what is a state, a dominion like Castile? What belongs to the realm of public life?”¹⁰ According to Leo, Ranke has “covered irrelevant circumstances and events exhaustively” while often not even touching upon what is “spiritually greatest and most important.”¹¹

The image of Ranke as a staunch positivist who sacrifices all sense of historical development on the altar of empirical particularities can be traced back to Hegel and Leo’s attacks. Of course, Ranke did not see himself in this light. With the idealist philosophers he shared a commitment to the main tenets of universal history. He thought that history is a unified process, that there is dimension to this process that goes beyond particular facts, and that this universal dimension is “mental-spiritual” (*geistig*) in character.¹²

8. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte. Band 1: Die Vernunft in der Geschichte* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1994), 31.

9. *Ibid.*, 15. In this context, Hegel also mentions Ranke explicitly. And indeed, *Anschaulichkeit* and visual metaphors play a central role for Ranke. See Eskildsen, “Leopold Ranke’s Archival Turn,” 437-439, J. D. Braw, “Vision as Revision: Ranke and the Beginning of Modern History,” *History and Theory* 46, no. 4 (2007), 49, 52.

10. Heinrich Leo, “Rezension zu Rankes *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker*,” *Jenaische Allgemeine Literaturzeitung* 24, *Ergänzungsblätter* 16/1, no. 17 and 18 (1828), 132.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Through the course of the eighteenth century, providential conceptions of universal history had come under pressure. The European overseas explorations had multiplied the cultures that needed to be incorporated into the universal-historical vision. The “age of discovery” had also led to a deeper conception of the past than the Bible allowed, and to a sense of the future being more open. See Franz Fillafer, “A World Connecting: From the Unity of History to Global History,” *History and Theory* 56, no. 1 (2017), 3-37. Nevertheless, the ideal of universal history survived well into the nineteenth century. Even when they rejected Biblical interpretations of history, many nineteenth-century historians still thought of history as a universal, unified, and meaningful process that represented God’s plan for humanity. As a consequence, the main problem of historical method was not the question of source-criticism but the question of how to arrive at knowledge of historical connections and totalities. See Jörn Rüsen, *Konfigurationen des Historismus: Studien zur deutschen Wissenschaftskultur* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main, 1993). As we will see, Ranke and Droysen are both good examples

Notably, Ranke's commitment to the general ideas of universal history also made him acknowledge Hegel's worries. In a diary entry from 1817 Ranke writes of the danger that history may "shatter into particularities"¹³ if pursued strictly empirically. However, he disagrees with the Hegelians about how to move beyond the merely particular. Like Johann Gottfried Herder, who had argued that the obsession with abstract principles blinded Enlightenment progressivists to the rich diversity of human forms of life,¹⁴ Ranke thinks that the universal in history is concrete and diverse. On this basis, he scolds Hegel for reducing human life to mere "shadows or schemes."¹⁵ If the universal is concrete, he reasons, it has to be represented in the particular. In his response to Leo, he consequently describes his own historiography as an attempt "to represent the general immediately and without digression in the particular."¹⁶ Later, he will turn this into an explicit goal of the study of history: "It is necessary that the historian keeps his eye open for the general. He will not conceive it in advance, like the philosopher; rather while considering the individual the general course, which the development of the world has taken, will reveal itself to him."¹⁷

Ranke thinks that all historical writing, no matter what its subject matter, must address the universal in the particular. But he also maintains the possibility of a specific genre of historical writing, a type of historiography that would dedicate itself to the unified process of history as such: universal history or world history represents the "past life of the human kind . . . in its fullness and totality"¹⁸ and this reveals "God's plan in the world."¹⁹ This is "the ideal, the final goal, to the attainment of which the particular studies should pave the way."²⁰ To some extent, Ranke's own career exemplifies this maxim: after having written various national histories, Ranke turned to the task of writing an encompassing world history toward the end of his life.²¹

But how is universal history possible, if philosophy's aprioristic constructions have been replaced by the meticulous assessment of available historical records? In the following sections, I will reconstruct Ranke's response to this challenge. I show that this response entails not just an answer to what makes the historical

of the tendency to maintain the ideal of universal history, while searching for new methodological solutions to the problem of connection and unity.

13. Leopold von Ranke, *Tagebücher: Aus Werk und Nachlass*. (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1964), 233.

14. Johann Gottfried Herder, "Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit," in *Schriften zu Philosophie, Literatur, Kunst und Altertum 1774–1787* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1994), 9–108.

15. Leopold von Ranke, *Über die Epochen der neueren Geschichte: Historisch kritische Ausgabe. Aus Werk und Nachlass II* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1971), 64.

16. Leopold von Ranke, "Replik," *Allgemeine Literaturzeitung* 2, no. 113 (1828), 198. For a recapitulation of the dispute between Ranke and Leo that also takes into account their interpretations of Macchiavelli, see Iggers, *German Conception of History*, 45–46.

17. Leopold von Ranke, *Vorlesungseinleitungen: Aus Werk und Nachlass IV* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1975), 88; for a similar expression, see also Leopold von Ranke, *Das Briefwerk* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1949), 265.

18. Ranke, *Vorlesungseinleitungen*, 296–297.

19. *Ibid.*, 199.

20. *Ibid.*, 413.

21. See also Muhlack, "Das Problem der Weltgeschichte bei Leopold Ranke."

process meaningful but also a normative account of the historian's disciplinary ethos.

II. OBJECTIVITY AS IMPARTIALITY

Ranke's debt to Protestant theology is well documented.²² In his diaries we find repeated expressions of his conviction that a divine power guides the historical process²³ and of the belief that historical change reveals "the divine idea."²⁴ Ranke sometimes expresses this sentiment by comparing history with a living current, a metaphor that Herder had already used to illustrate harmony in history.²⁵ Herder and Ranke agree that a successful universal history would not merely reconstruct the unified process of the development of humankind, it would also show this process to be harmonious and directed.

Yet Ranke's stance toward the possibility of universal history remains somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, Ranke maintains that the general can be known.²⁶ But on the other hand, he thinks that the goal of universal history cannot be fully realized. Universal history is complicated by the lack of sources documenting the early epochs of humanity²⁷ and, more fundamentally, by the fact that the finite human mind cannot grasp divine harmony in its entirety.²⁸ A further tension runs between Ranke's idea that the historian has to intuit the divine, and his insistence that historical knowledge can be reached only on the basis of a rigorous assessment of the available sources.²⁹ The solution to these tensions lies in thinking of universal history as a regulative ideal that can be approached inductively. Indeed, Ranke thinks of historical methodology as an inductive process that starts with source-criticism and ends with intuition.

Ranke has an empiricist conception of historical sources. Although historical knowledge cannot be based on direct experience, it should at least be based on the next-best thing: the reliable testimony of direct witnesses and participants.³⁰ In this way, source-criticism and archival work secure the experiential base of historiography.³¹ But Ranke conceives of source-criticism as just the first step in

22. Braw, "Vision as Revision"; Carl Hinrichs, *Ranke und die Geschichtstheologie der Goethezeit* (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1954). Yet despite the theological underpinnings of his thinking, Ranke also argued for the independence of history from theology. See Frederick Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 281-283; Ulrich Muhlack, "Leopold und Heinrich Ranke im Spannungsfeld von evangelischer Erweckung und historischem Denken," in *Geschichtsbewusstsein und Zukunftserwartung in Pietismus und Erweckungsbewegung*, ed. J. C. Schnurr and W. Breul (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 192-220.

23. Ranke, *Tagebücher*, 234.

24. *Ibid.*, 236.

25. Herder, "Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit," 41; Ranke, *Epochen*, 62; *Briefwerk*, 110.

26. Ranke, *Vorlesungseinleitungen*, 304, 414.

27. *Ibid.*, 435.

28. *Ibid.*, 83.

29. Leonard Krieger, *Ranke: The Meaning of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 10-16; Schnädelbach, *Geschichtsphilosophie nach Hegel*, 45.

30. Leopold von Ranke, *Zur Kritik neuerer Geschichtsschreiber: Eine Beylage zu desselben romanischen und germanischen Geschichten* (Leipzig: Reimer, 1824), 8.

31. See also Eskildsen, "Leopold Ranke's Archival Turn," 441.

a broader process of historical reconstruction and representation. He is well aware that source-criticism by itself does not provide knowledge of historical totalities: historical formations like nations and ages, which connect particular facts into unified wholes.

In *Über die Aufgaben des Geschichtsschreibers* (1821) Humboldt had already argued that the historical method goes beyond the faithful reconstruction of facts. By merely describing the facts, the historian has not yet captured history itself. He has reached an “external, literal, seeming” truth but not the “inner truth” of the mental-spiritual totalities that make up the historical world.³² In order to arrive at inner truth, the historian needs to proceed like the artist or poet. He has to mobilize his intuition.³³

Ranke is not as quick as Humboldt to affirm the necessity of artistic intuition: in order to reach knowledge of historical totalities, the historian should use “induction from the well-known, not . . . divination from the little-known.”³⁴ Induction consists in tracing the causal connections between simultaneous as well as successive states and events, a process constrained by a careful study of the sources.³⁵ Nevertheless, Ranke allows some room for intuition when it comes to grasping the spiritual content of the totalities that were first revealed through induction. Because the unifying principle of these totalities is mental-spiritual in character, it can be known only by and through the human spirit. “After the work of criticism, intuition is necessary.”³⁶ This is also why, according to Ranke, history is not merely a science but also an art. Intuition enables the historian to find the universal in the particular. And through artistic recreation he presents the particular facts in a manner that enables the reader to grasp the universal from their narrative display.³⁷

Much has been made of Ranke’s objectivism, most famously expressed in his statement that history seeks “merely to show how it actually was.”³⁸ Objectivity is indeed of central importance to Ranke’s historical methodology. He repeatedly stresses that the goal of history is to represent “naked truth without adornment,”³⁹ “objective truth,”⁴⁰ and “complete objectivity.”⁴¹ But Ranke’s objectivism is not opposed to art and intuition. Rather, it is opposed to the rhetorical or exemplary

32. Wilhelm von Humboldt, “Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtsschreibers,” in *Schriften zur Anthropologie und Geschichte. Werke Bd. 1*, ed. A. Feltner and K. Giel (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1960), 585-586.

33. *Ibid.*, 585-587, 591-594.

34. Ranke, *Vorlesungseinleitungen*, 83.

35. *Ibid.*, 79-80.

36. *Ibid.*, 117; see also 78.

37. Jörn Rüsen, “Rhetoric and Aesthetics of History: Leopold von Ranke,” *History and Theory* 29, no. 2 (1990), 200-202; Rudolph Vierhaus, “Leopold von Ranke: Geschichtsschreibung zwischen Wissenschaft und Kunst,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 244, no. 1 (1987), 293.

38. Leopold von Ranke, *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker 1494–1514* (Leipzig: Dunker und Humblodt, 1885), vii. It has been noted that there is a certain ambiguity in Ranke’s formulation “wie es eigentlich gewesen”: “eigentlich” might be translated as “actually,” “really,” or “essentially.” This ambiguity fits well with the present interpretation of Ranke as adhering to the general tenets of universal history.

39. Ranke, *Zur Kritik*, 28.

40. Ranke, *Vorlesungseinleitungen*, 306.

41. *Ibid.*, 81.

use of history.⁴² And although his notion of objectivity is multi-layered,⁴³ the opposition to exemplary history marks impartiality as its most central feature.

Ranke views impartiality as the chief normative requirement to guide and constrain the historian's practices—at every stage of the methodological process. At the first stage it has to be decided on a case by case basis whether a given source is biased and whether its being biased leads to a distortion of the historical facts. Here, impartiality means assessing the sources with an open mind while keeping facts and value judgments strictly separate.⁴⁴ At the final step of the process, where intuition is needed, impartiality too plays a role. Here it is augmented into universal interest and universal sympathy: “The last result is sympathy, joint knowledge of the universe.”⁴⁵ But it is on the intermediate level of induction that impartiality does most of its work. On this level, it helps the historian to structure the historical field synchronically and diachronically, and thus to integrate particular facts into broader historical totalities.

In the synchronic dimension, Ranke conceives history as a constant struggle between opposing tendencies, parties and nations: “It is not an evenly calm development but a never-ending struggle . . . the contradiction is what is characteristic. Romanesque and Germanic world, Islam and Christianity, papacy and imperial empire, Protestantism and Catholicism, revolutionary and conservative tendencies fight each other but in struggle they are united; they are inextricably linked to each other.”⁴⁶ Struggle is thus a form of connection. But it can only be understood as such if the historian does not take sides in the historical conflicts investigated. Objectivity as impartiality requires that each tendency is understood from its own standpoint. As Ranke puts it, all parties in a conflict must be considered in “their inner constitution”⁴⁷ as well as in their context.⁴⁸ In this way, the historian reveals their connectedness and hence the unity of history.

In the diachronic perspective too, the historian must proceed impartially. Here, impartiality is tied to the rejection of linear progress. Ranke takes up Herder's critique of progressivism and the thought that historical ages need to be understood as totalities that have their center of happiness in themselves.⁴⁹ He argues that God would be unjust if he had designed history as a linear succession toward a predetermined goal: in this case, the value of historical epochs would not reside in themselves but merely in their contribution to a final goal.⁵⁰ In contrast, Ranke claims that “every epoch is immediate to God, and its value consists not in what emerges from it but in its own existence, its own proper self. Hence the contemplation of history, and of individual lives in history, receives a unique delight, since every epoch must be regarded as valid in itself, fully deserving of such

42. Rüsen, “Rhetoric,” 192-195.

43. Beiser, *German Historicist Tradition*, 275-279.

44. Ranke, *Zur Kritik*, 83-84, 91-92, 125, 162-163.

45. Ranke, *Tagebücher*, 240.

46. Ranke, *Vorlesungseinleitungen*, 414.

47. *Ibid.*, 81.

48. See also *ibid.*, 259.

49. Herder, “Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit,” 39.

50. Ranke, *Epochen*, 59.

respect.”⁵¹ Crucially, the historian can reach an adequate account of historical epochs and their spiritual content—the inner force that both connects and distinguishes historical epochs—only if he proceeds impartially.⁵²

To conclude, Ranke thinks of historical method as an inductive process that begins with source-criticism and closes with intuition. This process is, at every stage, guided and constrained by the normative demand of objectivity, with objectivity being understood as impartiality. Only by being impartial can the historian approach—although never fully reach—an understanding of universal history, the realization of God’s plan. In the diachronic perspective, objectivity as impartiality enables the historian to appreciate connection and meaning in struggle, whereas in the synchronic perspective, it enables him to encounter the historical world as filled with individualized meaning and value.

III. RELATIVISM AND WORLD HISTORY

Ranke’s particularism and his statement that all epochs are “equal to God” are often thought to express a brand of historical relativism. But the situation is more complex. First, although Ranke explicitly endorses the idea that all historical periods are equally valid, he makes their equal validity dependent on God’s benevolent view of human history.⁵³ Ranke’s historical relativism is thus derived from and dependent on a theologically grounded absolutism. It is God’s absolute perspective and divine justice that allows for an appreciation of the equal validity of all historical epochs. And it is only by emulating this absolute perspective that the historian can approach an understanding of the totality of human history. The emphasis on the theological foundations of Ranke’s views at least partially explains why he did not worry too much about their relativist implications. The threat of moral and political anarchy that, toward the late nineteenth century, would become associated with historical relativism does not arise for him. After all, his rejection of progressivism is not in conflict with but is rather a consequence of the firm belief in the existence of a benevolent God, a belief that also makes history appear as a meaningful process.

There is also another reason why Ranke remained unfazed by the relativist understanding of historical epochs, a reason that ties in more closely with his understanding of historical method. For Ranke, the normative principle of impartiality, which demands that the historian regard all epochs as equally valid, at the same time also guarantees the ethical significance of the historian’s craft. It does so on two levels.

First, Ranke states explicitly that impartiality is not just a methodological principle but an ethical one. “By nature [true history] has a moral and religious element. But the moral element does not consist in judging everyone based on predetermined ideas, the religious element not in vindicating the religious creed to which one belongs the sole right of existence . . . Rather, it consists in doing

51. *Ibid.*, 59-60.

52. Ranke, *Vorlesungseinleitungen*, 77.

53. Ranke, *Epochen*, 59-60, 62-63.

justice to each moral and religious being, even if it may be limited.”⁵⁴ Here, Ranke makes impartiality into a methodological equivalent of moral justice. And he holds that in being impartial, the historian emulates God’s absolute perspective: “before God all generations of humankind appear as equal and that is also how the historian must see things.”⁵⁵ Historical methodology thus receives its ultimate legitimization as the human analogue of divine benevolence and justice.

Second, although impartiality requires the historian to liberate himself from biases and political partisanship, the historiography that it effects does have straightforward political implications. In particular, Ranke’s conception of world history entails a broadly conservative outlook on social change. Ranke’s views on objectivity may be taken to jar with his conservative allegiances. But from Ranke’s own perspective, there is no real contradiction here.

As reconstructed above, impartiality allows for the integration of facts into meaningful totalities. In the synchronic perspective, impartiality reveals that the struggle of opposing tendencies, parties, and nations is a form of connection. Crucially, Ranke makes connectedness as such into the criterion for universality, and hence into the condition for the inclusion of peoples and ages into the universal-historical process. History is not unified by the common origin of humanity nor by a teleological goal but rather by “contacts between peoples” (*Völkerberührungen*).⁵⁶ Hence, universal history is world history: it is the history of nations connected in and through struggle. And although, according to Ranke, there are no peoples who are completely isolated, some nations have greater power and therefore also a more central place in the world-historical process: the “idea of humankind” is “embodied in the occidental nations . . . [B]ecause they have achieved world domination, we see the history of humankind in their history.”⁵⁷ Consequently, Ranke views the balance of state powers in Europe as the embodiment of God’s plan.⁵⁸

The diachronic perspective adds a further dimension to Ranke’s political vision. For Ranke, impartiality reveals balance, in particular the balance between revolutionary and conservative tendencies, and this balance guarantees the continuity of the world-historical process. “Only where both balance each other without getting into these fierce, all engulfing struggles can humankind thrive.”⁵⁹ World history proceeds and should proceed—the descriptive and normative are closely intertwined here—at an evolutionary, not revolutionary pace. Impartiality thus leads to an understanding of world history that aligns with a conservative outlook on social transformation.⁶⁰

54. Ranke, *Vorlesungseinleitungen*, 295.

55. Ranke, *Epochen*, 62-63.

56. *Ibid.*, 88, 207.

57. *Ibid.*, 435-436.

58. In more concrete terms, this also means that Ranke sees in state power a moral force. He privileges the state as the driving force of historical development, and makes it into a guarantor of balance—at the expense of mass movements and the individual’s civil rights. See Wolfgang Hardtwig, *Hochkultur des bürgerlichen Zeitalters* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 44-46; Iggers, *German Conception of History*, 48-49; Rüsen, “Rhetoric,” 198.

59. Ranke, *Vorlesungseinleitungen*, 82.

60. This connection is also highlighted in Rudolf Vierhaus, “Die Idee der Kontinuität im historiographischen Werk Leopold von Ranke,” in *Leopold von Ranke und die modern Geschichtswissenschaft*, ed. W. J. Mommsen (Stuttgart: Kett-Cotta, 1988), 166-175.

We can conclude that, although Ranke does indeed take all historical epochs to be of equal value, historical relativism is no concern to him. The same principle that gives rise to this view—impartiality—also guarantees the ethical and political significance of historiography. Impartiality constitutes the methodological analogue to God’s perspective, which is absolute, benevolent, and just. At the same time, it allows for a reconstruction of world history as a unified and meaningful process with conservative political implications.

IV. DROYSEN AGAINST RANKE

By the mid-nineteenth century, a new set of pressures and concerns began to shape historical debates. On the one hand, the autonomy of history now had to be secured not only against the neighboring fields of theology and philosophy but also against the natural sciences. The success and proliferation of the natural sciences, as well as the increasing public influence of scientists such as Carl Vogt or Emil Du Bois-Reymond put pressure on historians to clarify how history could be a “scientific” discipline, even if its objects and methods differed from those of the natural sciences.

On the other hand, the political situation after 1848 called for a reconsideration of the social and political role of historiography. The generation of historians that followed Ranke could not identify with his conservatism anymore nor with the indirect political role that he had assigned to historiography. Ranke’s universal history, which emphasized the balance between the great powers of Prussia and Austria, held no appeal for proponents of the small-German solution. They expected historiography to contribute to the process of German unification under Prussian leadership.

Droysen’s relationship to Ranke is shaped by these new concerns and pressures. Like Ranke, Droysen sees in professional historiography an alternative to the exemplary use of history. Like Ranke, he disdains philosophical abstraction. Like Ranke, he is motivated by the theological conviction that history follows God’s plan and is confident that the historian can grasp the universal course of history by immersing himself in the particulars.⁶¹

Nevertheless, he rejects Ranke’s methodological views, most important the ideal of objectivity. Droysen’s *Historik* lectures—which he first delivered in Jena in 1857, and which he continued to hold twenty-eight times in following years—entail a series of critical remarks and polemical attacks against Ranke and the “critical school” (*Kritische Schule*). Sometimes, Droysen expresses his disagreement with Ranke by targeting what he takes to be the reductive and incomplete character of his methodology. He bemoans that the critical school finds “the whole method of our science in criticism”⁶² and that it fails to heed the methodological relevance of interpretation and “understanding” (*Verstehen*).

61. See Hardtwig, *Hochkultur*, 54-55, 74; Robert Southard, “Theology in Droysen’s Early Political Historiography: Free Will, Necessity, and the Historian,” *History and Theory* 18, no. 3 (1979), 378-396.

62. Johann Gustav Droysen, *Historik: Historisch-kritische Ausgabe Bd. 1* (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1977), 113; see also Droysen, *Briefwechsel I* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1929), 104.

This is not a very strong critique. Put this way, the charge could easily be countered by pointing to Ranke's concepts of inference and intuition, which, although not worked out in great detail, fulfill similar functions as interpretation and understanding do for Droysen.⁶³

However, on a more fundamental level, Droysen challenges Ranke's conception of historical sources and of how knowledge is derived from them. He calls into question Ranke's preference for eyewitness accounts, pointing out that the "closeness" of the source to the reported events does not guarantee the quality of the report.⁶⁴ He also objects to Ranke's narrow focus on written documents. According to Droysen, everything that bears the mark of human spirit can provide meaningful material for the historian's reconstructive practice. Monuments, relics, tools, architecture, city structures, agricultural land, state constitutions, and language all carry information for the historian.⁶⁵

Droysen also questions whether there is such a thing as a historical fact. He argues that neither the historical sources nor the inferential processes by which the historian derives knowledge about the past are free from subjective influences. "The whole concept of an actual, objective fact that we are supposed to search for is completely unclear and arbitrary; what is designated as such is generally an act of multiple composition, which by nature allows as many views as it has aspects."⁶⁶ Facts are not simple but complex. There is no such thing as an uninterpreted, brute fact. On the basis of this insight, Droysen then also problematizes the idea that facts can be integrated into meaningful totalities unproblematically. He points out that the selection of relevant facts and their integration into purposive wholes is a subjective process. The capacity "to give a synopsis of the perceived and to elevate it from correctness to truth . . . presupposes the existence of a standard . . . that [lies] not in the things objectively but in the representor, in the thought of his representation."⁶⁷ Like Ranke, Droysen takes up Humboldt's distinction between outer and inner truth. But he reformulates it in terms of "correctness" and "truth." Although source-based knowledge of individual historical facts can be correct, only an integrated, synoptical view of historical totalities enables the historian to reach truth: knowledge about the driving forces and ultimate meaning of the historical process. And this integrated, synoptical view is bound to be subjective.⁶⁸

Droysen's epistemology of historical knowledge is predicated on the active role of the historian at each step of the methodological process. For Droysen, the self of the historian, which is itself understood to be a historical product, is not an obstacle but an enabling condition for historical truth. In the following, I reconstruct Droysen's subject-centered epistemology of history. It will arise that

63. Droysen uses the terms "interpretation" and "understanding" almost synonymously. I will give my own reconstruction of the concept of understanding in the next section. On ambiguities in the concept, see Karl-Heinz Spieler, *Untersuchungen zu Johann Gustav Droysens Historik* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1970), 114-128.

64. Droysen, *Historik*, 148.

65. *Ibid.*, 71.

66. *Ibid.*, 114.

67. *Ibid.*, 218-219.

68. *Ibid.*, 114, 218-219, 230, 236.

the problem of universal history, which for Ranke presented itself as the problem of revealing the universal in the particular, takes a new form: how can universal ideas be recaptured from their particular expressions? Droysen's answer to this question entails not just a reconsideration of what makes history meaningful but also a justification of the ethical and political importance of the historian's craft. As we will see, the methodological antagonism between Ranke and Droysen mirrors the conflict in their political views.⁶⁹

V. IDEAS AND STANDPOINTS

According to Droysen, the method of historiography has to be determined by reference to its object, history itself.⁷⁰ Droysen's material philosophy of history is strongly influenced by Hegel, whose lectures he had attended while studying in Berlin. In particular, his concepts of "ethical forces" (*sittliche Mächte*), freedom, progress, and the self-expression of ideas in history have a Hegelian ring to them.⁷¹ However, Droysen reformulates many of these concepts in anthropological terms.⁷²

Droysen's *Historik* opens with an elaboration on the "generic concept" (*Gattungsbegriff*) of humankind: although human beings have a natural, animalistic side to them, man goes beyond his natural dispositions by entering into an active relationship with his environment. This relationship is characterized by freedom and is thus an ethical relation. Droysen spells out the character of this relation in terms of the interconnected concepts of "education" (*Bildung*) and "labor" (*Arbeit*).⁷³ The concept of education draws attention to the ways in which individuals actively appropriate what is given to them and how, in the process of doing so, they transform themselves. "Only by internalizing the given . . . [does man] have more than an animalistic, a human life. He is not by birth in the here and now, he must become it in deed and truth as well. He must become a human being in order to be a human being."⁷⁴ By emphasizing labor, Droysen highlights the ways in which humans transform not just themselves but also the world around them. Droysen's central concepts for describing this transformative process are "expression" (*Ausdruck*) and "formation" (*Formgebung*): "the spirit lives only by creating its own world, and it creates it by formatively expressing

69. See also Michael Maclean, "Johann Gustav Droysen and the Development of Historical Hermeneutics," *History and Theory* 21, no. 3 (1982), 351; Sebastian Manhart, "Was wird werden, wenn man weiß, was wird? Geschichtsschreibung und Staatswissenschaft als Interventionen in sich selbst hervorbringende Systeme im vormärzlichen Diskurs und bei Johann Gustav Droysen," in *Historie und Historik: 200 Jahre Johann Gustav Droysen*, ed. H. Blanke (Vienna: Böhlau, 2009), 38-72.

70. Droysen, *Historik*, 19.

71. For detailed accounts of the relationship between Hegel and Droysen, see Christoph J. Bauer, "Das Geheimnis aller Bewegung ist ihr Zweck." *Geschichtsphilosophie bei Hegel und Droysen* (Hamburg: Meiner 2001); Irene Kohlstrunk, *Logik und Historie in Droysens Geschichtstheorie: Eine Analyse von Genese und Konstitutionsprinzipien seiner Historik* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1980).

72. Droysen's anthropology also takes center stage in Friedrich Jaeger, *Bürgerliche Modernisierungskrise und historische Sinnbildung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1994), 40-50.

73. Droysen, *Historik*, 15-17.

74. *Ibid.*, 14.

and representing everything that is excited and moving in him.”⁷⁵ According to Droysen, the historical realities of language, art, religion, as well as economic relations, law, and the state, are mental-spiritual formations that express human spirit. They do not emerge as mere agglomerates of the various undirected actions of individuals though. Rather, they express ethical forces or ideas. These ideas, in turn, are universal in the sense of being shared by all historical cultures and periods—even if not all historical ages express these universal ideas with the same degree of development and complexity.⁷⁶ “There is no relation of human being and doing that is not an expression of something mental-spiritual, general, an idea; for it is human because it refers back to something which realizes itself in it, and which is therefore the truth of the appearance.”⁷⁷ Hegel’s influence is evident in the statement that the truth of historical appearances consists in ideas. But Droysen is not willing to grant ideas an absolute status. Neither does he think that ideas will realize themselves necessarily.⁷⁸ And unlike Humboldt and Ranke, he does not think of universal ideas as of divine origin. As a result, universal history changes its character.

First, Droysen’s picture is more overt in its idealism, but at the same time, it is more secular than Ranke’s. Although Droysen maintains that God can be understood through history and vice versa,⁷⁹ his picture of the historical process does not depend on strong theological assumptions. Instead, Droysen sees in history the ethical process of human self-creation. His universal ideas—the state, matrimony, law, religion, art, and so on—are predefined not by a divine will but by human nature. Consequently, the relation between the universal and the particular is redefined as a relation of expression: the universal is the mental-spiritual content that expresses itself in particular historical appearances.

Second, and as a consequence, the theme of divine benevolence moves to the background. Droysen does not think of all historical epochs as equal to God. The Herderian picture of a plethora of different ages, each having its center of happiness in itself, is not central to Droysen’s thinking. Accordingly, there is more room for progressivist concepts. Droysen thinks that historical expressions of ideas are always incomplete and that the mutual critique of ideas pushes the historical process forward: “appearances change because the truth is never completely formed in them.”⁸⁰ This also means that the universal can be grasped only in change and progressive development: “the finite existences have their analogue of perfection in movement, in progress.”⁸¹

Third, Droysen does not conceive of the universal dimension of history in terms of the connectedness of nations in struggle. He discusses world history in the context of the “didactic mode” of historical presentation, which coexists

75. *Ibid.*, 23.

76. *Ibid.*, 204-205.

77. *Ibid.*, 201.

78. Droysen explicitly rejects Hegel’s views on necessity and reason in history; see Droysen, *Historik*, 162-163, 383-384.

79. *Ibid.*, 30, 436, 468; see also Droysen, “Theologie der Geschichte,” in *Historik: Vorlesungen über Enzyklopädie und Methodologie der Geschichte* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1967), 369-385.

80. *Ibid.*, 5.

81. *Ibid.*; see also 201, 286, Droysen, “Theologie,” 380-382.

alongside three other genres of historical writing: investigative presentation, narrative presentation, and historical discussion. For Droysen, world history is didactic because it serves the goals of pedagogy and education by capturing the “totality of all historical thoughts.”⁸² Accordingly, the universal dimension of history is given not by the balance of nations but by the totality of progressively developing universal ideas.

Yet, although Droysen conceptualizes the universal in history quite differently than Ranke does, he shares Ranke’s conviction that the universal needs to be accessed through the particular. And since for Droysen, the relation between universal and particular is a relation of expression, he attributes to historical method a hermeneutical structure: historical method infers essences from appearances, ideas from expressions. “It is necessary to recognize the formative forces in that which from them is still available, that is to trace back the forms, which show themselves to be expressed in the given, to that which wanted to express itself in them. Is it necessary to *understand*.”⁸³ The crucial point for Droysen is that the inferential process of understanding is necessarily subjective: in order to recognize spiritual essences in the given, the historian needs to mobilize his own subjectivity.

As we have seen, Droysen criticizes the Rankean ideal of objectivity for being impossible to satisfy.⁸⁴ But Droysen does not think of subjective influences as a necessary evil. Rather, he thinks that the historian’s situated and partial subjectivity provides both the epistemic foundations of historical knowledge and a normative standard for historical methodology.

With respect to the epistemology of history, Droysen makes two different arguments for how historical understanding is possible. On the one hand, all humans share in the same ethical and intellectual categories. They have the same dispositions for translating experiences, feelings, and thoughts into expressions. Hence, understanding is based on mental-spiritual commonalities among all human beings.⁸⁵ On the other hand, Droysen also emphasizes that historical understanding is based on historicity itself. To the extent that the present is a product of history, the past can be recovered from its traces in the present: “Each [ethical sphere] has its history which reaches up for aeons; and since the same succession reaches into the here and now, since the formation of the present contains the lived through age rings of earlier formations, we, who live in the fullness of the present, are capable of understanding that which has been lived through.”⁸⁶ The concept of historical continuity enables a positive conception of the historian’s own historical situatedness. To the extent that the historian’s self is situated in the present, it can access the past that is continuous with and contained in the present. “Historical research presupposes . . . that the content of our self is . . .

82. *Ibid.*, 234. Droysen believes that historical thought—the capacity to view the present as a historical product—fosters education in general. World history is especially valuable as a pedagogical tool because it contributes to the formation of a generalized human identity. For a detailed account of Droysen’s concept of historical education, see Assis, *What Is History For?*, 77-90.

83. Droysen, *Historik*, 21-22.

84. *Ibid.*, 237.

85. *Ibid.*, 22, 27.

86. *Ibid.*, 360.

a historical result.”⁸⁷ Understanding requires the historian’s subjectivity because this subjectivity is a result of the past that the historian seeks to understand.⁸⁸

On the methodological level, Droysen puts an even stronger, normative emphasis on subjectivity. Almost an exact mirror image of Ranke, Droysen now defines subjectivity in terms of partiality. He polemicizes against the “eunuchoid”⁸⁹ ideal of impartiality and advises the historian to embrace a firm ethical-political standpoint. In his view, only a partial standpoint can give the historian a clear guiding principle for the reconstruction the past. The narrative presentation of historical processes in particular needs to find a “*fixed point of view* in the thought the process which it represents.”⁹⁰

Partiality, however, does not mean arbitrary judgment or willful distortion of the facts. A partial historical reconstruction still needs to fulfill requirements of factuality and correctness. Droysen even claims that the “the strongest subjective tendency can most confidently present itself [in the] most factual manner of presentation.”⁹¹ This thought makes sense once we recognize that Droysen adheres to Humboldt’s distinction between outer and inner truth. Particular facts or individual appearances must be represented adequately and without distortion, but they do not yet form history. Only when the individual facts are unified into totalities from a partial perspective can historical representation move from particular appearances to the ideas expressed in them.

Droysen’s claims about partiality apply not only to what he calls narrative history but also to world history: the historian needs to embrace a firm standpoint in order to reveal the historical connectedness of universal ideas. But since there is and always will be a plurality of historically situated standpoints, this implies that there can be no final account of universal history. Droysen admits that plural reconstructions not just of particular historical episodes but of the world-historical process at large, are possible. “The present itself is . . . divided by all sorts of interests. And since every observer . . . looks over what has become from his standpoint, a not inconsiderable diversity in the reflection and judgment of things emerges.”⁹² Although Droysen thinks of subjectivity as an enabling condition rather than an obstacle to historical understanding, he also holds that partiality places certain limits on historical knowledge, including knowledge about the universal dimension of history. Only the partial standpoint of the historian enables him to reveal the “truth of the appearance.”⁹³ But the truth reached in this way is relative. “Indeed, the known historical truth is only relative truth, it is the truth as seen by the narrator, it is the truth from his standpoint, his insight, his level of education.”⁹⁴ Subjectivity as partiality is a normative methodological requirement that needs to be fulfilled if the historian seeks to move beyond correctness and toward historical truth. But historical truth is relative.

87. *Ibid.*, 106.

88. See also Jaeger, *Bürgerliche Modernisierungskrise und historische Sinnbildung*, 68.

89. Droysen, *Historik*, 236.

90. *Ibid.*, 234.

91. *Ibid.*, 236.

92. *Ibid.*, 262-263.

93. *Ibid.*, 201.

94. *Ibid.*, 230.

VI. PROGRESS AND POLITICS

As observed earlier, Droysen is not seriously invested in the idea that all historical epochs are equal to God. Although he emphasizes that each epoch's ideas are valid only relative to their respective stage in the historical process, his affirmation of progress disarms this thought of its relativist implications. For Droysen, there is a hierarchy of historical periods: since later epochs are built on earlier ones and have integrated their accomplishments, they are also fuller and more complex.⁹⁵

If there is a relativist dimension to Droysen's thinking, it arises not in his philosophy of history but in his epistemology. After all, Droysen relativizes historical truth to the partial standpoint of the historian. Interestingly though, Droysen does not worry too much about the relativist implications of his methodological views. When he writes of wanting "nothing more and nothing less than the relative truth of my standpoint"⁹⁶ this is a statement of confidence, not an admission of defeat. The situation is similar to Ranke's case: the same principle that gives rise to relativism also guarantees the ethical significance of historiography and its relevance for present politics.⁹⁷

First, note that for Droysen, partiality is not just a methodological but also an ethical principle. Whereas Ranke had associated impartiality with divine justice, Droysen associates partiality with patriotic duty. In this context, he draws once more on the idea that the historian is situated in his own time and culture. But now he puts the emphasis on the historian as an active participant in the struggles of his time. Being involved in the present, the historian's relation to history is not purely contemplative. Quite to the contrary, the historian pursues historical study in order to intervene in the present on behalf of the "right of history."⁹⁸ And in the particular moment of Droysen's writing, the right of history calls for national unification: "the historian has a great patriotic duty, that of giving the people, the state, a picture of itself."⁹⁹ Hence, partiality does not consist in subjectivity narrowly conceived—it does not reduce to the ideas, views, and preferences that a given individual may hold arbitrarily. Writing history from a partial standpoint means taking a perspective that is historically situated, yet supra-individual. The standpoint at stake is the standpoint of nation, state, and religion.¹⁰⁰ So under-

95. *Ibid.*, 210, 260.

96. *Ibid.*, 236.

97. In the revolution of 1848, Droysen adhered to a brand of right-wing liberalism that prioritized national unification over constitutionalism, representative democracy, and civil rights. He thought Prussian interests coincided with German interests, saw in national unification a condition for freedom, and did not distinguish between the ethical and the social. See Iggers, *German Conception of History*, 67-68; Wilfried Nippel, *Johann Gustav Droysen: Ein Leben zwischen Wissenschaft und Politik* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2008). Droysen's political views did not change much after the failure of the revolution, but his historiography became less deterministic and less theological and instead put a stronger emphasis on free will and political decision-making. It also recognized the role of military power as the driving force of historical development. Robert Southard, *Droysen and the Prussian School of History* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 194-198, 203-206.

98. Droysen, *Rede zur tausendjährigen Gedächtnisfeier des Vertrags zu Verdun* (Kiel: Bülow, 1943), 5.

99. Droysen, *Historik*, 235.

100. See also MacLean, "Droysen and the Development of Historical Hermeneutics," 361.

stood, partiality is both a methodological requirement and a moral demand. It secures the historian's craft a straightforward legitimation in relation to the political concerns that Droysen thought pressing at the time.

Second, Droysen argues that historiography can serve political decision-makers on a concrete, tangible level. He objects not just to the political use of exemplary history but also to "doctrinal" methods of political decision-making. The latter he attacks on the grounds that they presuppose an absolute truth that is out of reach for finite human beings. Doctrines and speculative systems are nothing but "moments of the fulfilled present . . . they can count only as relatively, not as absolutely complete."¹⁰¹ The historical method, in contrast, does not presuppose absolute truth.¹⁰² By acknowledging change and historicity, it can provide knowledge about how the present has come about. In this context, Droysen takes up the theme of history being continuous and progressive. He argues that insight into the essential continuities that connect the present to the past also allow for the identification of a direction in the historical process and, as a result, for nuanced decisions about the future. The political actor who seeks to decide thoughtfully "will feel the need . . . in each essential point to become aware of its connection and continuity, he will use the past to illuminate *this* point completely, to decide this alternative with confidence."¹⁰³ A good statesman is thus a "practical historian."¹⁰⁴ He directs the matters of the state on the basis of insight into its historical continuity, as well as with a sense for its historical particularity.¹⁰⁵ Historical knowledge—understood as partial knowledge about the historical development of nations and states—becomes a prerequisite for political decision-making.

This is why epistemic relativism was not a major concern for Droysen. For him, partiality not only enables the historian to find universal ideas expressed in particular appearances and to present a unified account of historical events. Partiality is also an ethos, a moral duty to be fulfilled by the historian for the sake of fostering national identity and nuanced political decision-making. Historiography hence receives its ultimate legitimation as the "science" of the state. It can lay claim to an ethical-political significance, which, in Droysen's view, far outweighs the relativist worries about the relativity of truth.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have revisited the nineteenth-century German debates over historical objectivity and the political functions of historiography. I have offered a comparison between two influential contributors to these debates, who are also

101. Droysen, *Historik*, 269.

102. Quite to the contrary, it is based on the assumption that human beings decide actively about the forms in which they organize their collective existence, and hence acknowledges change and freedom. See also Thomas Burger, "Droysen's Defense of Historiography: A Note," *History and Theory* 16, no. 2 (1977), 168-173; Maclean, "Droysen and the Development of Historical Hermeneutics," 355-356.

103. Droysen, *Historik*, 221.

104. *Ibid.*, 63, 269.

105. *Ibid.*, 272.

often thought to be the paradigmatic examples for two diametrically opposed approaches to historical method.

Ranke and Droysen share a commitment to the goals of universal history. They think of human history as a unified process, they believe that there is a dimension to this process that goes beyond particular facts, and they hold that this universal dimension is mental-spiritual in character. Ultimately, their methodologies respond to the question of how history can be found to have a general meaning and how historiography can provide knowledge that is relevant to the present, in a situation in which speculative philosophy and exemplary history have been rejected.

Ranke and Droysen provide diametrically opposed solutions to this common challenge. Ranke envisions the historical method as an inductive process, which proceeds from source-criticism to intuition and that, at every stage, is constrained by the historian's impartiality. Droysen, in contrast, thinks of historical method as a hermeneutic process in which ideas are recovered from their expressions and argues that this process is, at every stage, conditioned by the historian's partial subjectivity.

In both authors' methodological reflections, relativist elements emerge. Ranke's demand for objectivity leads him to think of all historical epochs as equally valid, whereas Droysen's hypostasis of partiality engenders an account of relative historical truth. Nevertheless, Ranke and Droysen remain unfazed by the relativist elements in their views. This is because they both believe in the ethical significance of the historian's work. Ranke and Droysen think of impartiality and partiality not just in methodological terms but also as an ethical duty. Their historical methodologies formulate normative accounts of the historian's disciplinary ethos. This ethos, in turn, secures the study of history a relevance for the present. By being impartial, Ranke's historian can reveal balance and continuity in history, bolstering a conservative outlook on social transformation. By being partial, Droysen's historian can reveal direction in history and guide political decision-making toward national unification. The methodological conflict between Ranke and Droysen is therefore best understood as a conflict about the historian's disciplinary ethos, which in turn is tied to a broader political and ideological conflict.¹⁰⁶

This finding leads us to reconsider the general trajectory of German historicism and relativism in the nineteenth century. Ever since Ernst Troeltsch declared historicism to be in crisis,¹⁰⁷ it has become common to draw close connections between the nineteenth-century quest for the thorough historicization of all beliefs, values, and forms of life, and the threat of historical relativism.¹⁰⁸ Indeed,

106. MacLean, "Droysen and the Development of Historical Hermeneutics," 351-354; Manhart, "Was wird werden, wenn man weiß, was wird?"

107. Ernst Troeltsch, "Die Krisis des Historismus," *Die neue Rundschau* XXXIII, *Jahrgang der freien Bühne* 1 (1922), 572-590.

108. Charles Bambach, *Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: Mohr 1960); Iggers, *German Conception of History*; Schnädelbach, *Geschichtsphilosophie nach Hegel*.

the terms “historicism” and “relativism” emerged hand in hand toward the late nineteenth century, and initially, they were nothing but terms of abuse.¹⁰⁹

Yet the analysis presented in this article shows that, even when they rejected speculative philosophy and pushed for historical methodologies that declared all epochs to be equally valid, or historical truth to be relative, nineteenth-century practicing historians had no reason to worry about relativism. The relativist elements in their thinking did not block historiography from being ethically and politically relevant. Quite to the contrary: in Ranke and Droysen, the methodological ideas that lead to forms of relativism also enable historiography to claim relevance for the present.

Historical relativism came to be conceived as a serious threat only once the ethical-political significance of the historian’s craft was called into question. This happened when the concern with historicity re-entered philosophical discourse, where methodological questions were isolated from their ethical and political implications. Toward the turn of the century, the neo-Kantian projects of Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert and the hermeneutic philosophy of Wilhelm Dilthey set out to provide the historical disciplines with a firm epistemological foundation, while reserving to philosophy the task of normative reflection. Historical methodology was robbed of its ethical and political significance. In this context, historicism was increasingly viewed as “a form of relativism and skepticism.”¹¹⁰ “[T]he relativity of every sort of human conception of the connectedness of things” became “the last word of the historical worldview.”¹¹¹ Historical relativism did not emerge in practicing historians’ methodological reflections or in their actual historiographical practices. It emerged in philosopher’s reflections on those practices.¹¹² This finding suggests that the so-called “crisis of historicism” was in reality a crisis of philosophy.

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109. Annette Wittkau, *Historismus: Zur Geschichte des Begriffs und des Problems* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992).

110. Heinrich Rickert, “Geschichtsphilosophie,” in *Die Philosophie im Beginn des zwanzigsten Jahrhundert.: Festschrift für Kuno Fischer*, ed. W. Windelband (Heidelberg: Winter, 1905), 117.

111. Wilhelm Dilthey, “Rede zum 70. Geburtstag,” in *Die Geistige Welt: Einleitung in die Philosophie des Lebens. Gesammelte Schriften V* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1990), 9.

112. See also Beiser, *German Historicist Tradition*, 24.