

Empiricism

Week One



Empiricism in the Philosophy of Knowledge

- The Scientific Revolution of the 16th and 17th Centuries was based upon the notion that "knowledge should be derived from observation of the material world."
- This notion was carried forward to scholars who wanted to understand the nature of human society, and crucially, history. This eventually led to the professionalism of historical study, particularly the consultation of archival documents.

Leopold von Ranke

German. Born 1795, Died 1886. Von Ranke rejected many of the previous attempts by scholars to write about the past, particularly the sources they tried to use.

Rather than utilize memoirs and accounts written after events, von Ranke stated that "primary" or "original sources were superior and fulfilled the Empiricist philosophy. Few had ever made this statement that not all sources are equal.



Von Ranke and Objectivity

- Von Ranke believed that the past and its representation is independent of the historian. Its existence is factual, observable and verifiable (so long as one is using the proper resources). Therefore, if historians are performing their task properly, it is possible, according to von Ranke, to "represent the past objectively and accurately. In other words, the truth of an historical account rests upon its correspondence to the facts." [Green & Troup, p. 3].
- He (and Empiricism) has been heavily critiqued for these naive statements.

Limitations of Empiricism and von Ranke's craft

- Not all groups of people leave behind written "primary source" documentation. How does one write a history of "society" or "the poor" or "women" according to von Ranke's principles. This can lead to an elitist history.
- Is impartiality of the historian possible?
- Ascertaining causation is part of the historian's job, and this is interpretive, not objective.
- Lack of cohesive narrative; strong on description, but weak on interpretation and analysis.

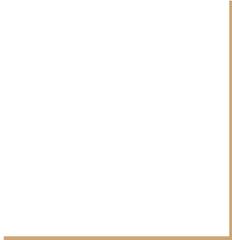
Legacies of Empiricism and von Ranke's craft

- Emphasis on the investigation and critique of sources and their validity.
- Emphasis on primary sources as more "valid" than secondary.
- Rejection of "providential causation" (i.e. "it happened this way because God thought it best).
- Emphasis on in-text or footnote citations, so that other historians can see where information was obtained.
- Relationship between hypothesis and fact-finding.
 - Rather than searching archives for facts which support your hypothesis, instead hunt for ones which disprove it, potentially refining and strengthening your argument.



William Sewell,
Jr.

Week One



William Sewell, Jr.

- Born 1940.
- Son of William Sewell, a prominent positivist sociologist from the University of Wisconsin.
- Received his PhD from University of California, Berkeley in 1971, on the topic "The Structure of the Working Class of Marseille in the Middle of the Nineteenth Century."
- Was an early practitioner of both the "New Social History" and "Cultural History"



Social History: sources, successes, stagnation

- Social History originated in the 1960s and 1970s, largely as a response to the mainstream diplomatic, biographical, and empiricist history.
- Social History was a change in subject matter, methods, and style
 - First, SH studied previously neglected groups: peasants, poor, workers, criminals, women
 - Second, SH "attempted to capture the whole range of ordinary people's life experiences.
 - Third, SH used new evidence to bring these topics to light: tax registers, deeds, census data, baptism and marriage records. These materials were inherently quantitative.
- Quantification was one way to view history "from the bottom up".
- Many social historians adopted a loose, Marxian-inspired base/superstructure model

Cultural History: New Questions, New Theories

By the 1970s, many of the practitioners of the New Social History became frustrated with so-called "economic determinism" in the way they wrote history. According to Sewell, Jr. "It seemed to me that although quantitative methodology had enabled us to understand more and more about the structural constraints and social forces that shaped people's lives, it offered no guidance for understanding how people actually made sense of and grappled with these forces and constraints" (40).

Many new "cultural historians" sought out theories from Anthropology or Literary studies to analyse society as a "text" or through language transmission. This was heavily influenced by theories of postmodernism and post-structuralism.

Much of Women's and Gender History came from this movement.

Sewell's Disillusionment with Cultural History

"I have increasingly come to worry that the triumph of cultural history over social history has perhaps been too easy. . . . The result, I fear, is a form of history that, for all its impressive achievements and in spite of its continuing vitality and political relevance, nevertheless finds itself disarmed in the face of certain important questions posed by the history of our own era. . . . [Namely,] the structures of world capitalism" (49).

Sewell also fears that a "Text" based history lends itself too heavily to elitist histories.

Furthermore, rejecting quantification and socioeconomic determinants has rendered history impotent at addressing some major problems we face today.

