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# Introduction: Historicism as a travelling concept

Herman Paul and Adriaan van Veldhuizen

## Abstract

Starting with the fictional figure of Mme. Historicist as invoked by Joan Copjec, an American psychoanalytic critic of historicism, this introduction sets the stages for the volume by arguing that historicism can productively be interpreted as a ‘travelling concept’. Historicism is not only a technical term for nineteenth-century modes of thinking; it is also a term of abuse, a word of warning and a derogatory concept invoked by humanities and social science scholars throughout the twentieth century. Precisely as such, the term has travelled across disciplinary divides as well as through time and space. It has aligned itself to other concepts, such as relativism (‘travel companions’), and been charged with emotional meaning (‘luggage’). After specifying the historiographical advantages of studying historicism as a travelling concept, the introduction explains the structure of the volume and briefly introduces the chapters that follow.

## Mme. Historicist

What is wrong with Michel Foucault? For Joan Copjec, a Lacanian psychoanalytic theorist who teaches at Brown University, the problem with Foucault is not that he consistently analyses society in terms of knowledge-power relations. The problem is that Foucault’s analytical apparatus leaves little space for anything but competing relations of knowledge and power. Whatever the theme at hand,

the bottom line is always that regimes of power determine what counts as knowledge. Copjec therefore dubs Foucault a 'historicist', that is, someone guilty of a 'reduction of society to its indwelling network of relations of power and knowledge'.<sup>1</sup>

Copjec's choice for historicism as a polemical term may surprise at first sight. Is history – historicism's root word – as conceptualized by Foucault the focus of her critique? Or is it his totalizing conception of power? If readers consult the index to find more relevant occurrences of the term 'historicism', some more surprises await them. Not only is Copjec's book one of very few that have an index entry on 'historicism and breast-feeding anxiety', the author also turns out to personify historicism into a pedantic young woman, Mme. Historicist, who demonstrates her inability to see anything else than barren facts of history by exclaiming in the midst of an emotional conversation over fear of suffocation: 'In the old days, three or four people were needed to pull on the laces of a corset to tighten it.'<sup>2</sup> Like Foucault, Mme. Historicist seems to miss the point, that is, a psychoanalytically relevant point that cannot be captured in terms of historical facts.

Perhaps the most helpful clue as to the meaning and origin of 'historicism' in Copjec's book is a passage that invokes Lacanian psychoanalysis as a 'challenge to the historicism that pervades much of the thinking of our time' – immediately followed by the claim that psychoanalysis and historicism as represented by Lacan and Foucault, respectively, are among the most powerful discourses in modern intellectual life.<sup>3</sup> This draws on a longer tradition of representing the relation between psychoanalysis and historical study in antagonistic terms (a tradition that goes back at least to Erich Fromm in the early 1930s).<sup>4</sup> More specifically, in contrasting Foucauldian historicism with Lacanian psychoanalysis, Copjec repeats the received idea that Foucault has little positive to say about psychoanalytic theory.<sup>5</sup> Also, she varies on the trope of 'Foucauldian historicism' that circulated among American humanities scholars in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>6</sup> Copjec's charge of historicism, therefore, draws on older polemical discourses. Perhaps one might even say: it was meaningful precisely because it was not original.

Indeed, throughout the twentieth century, intellectuals in a wide variety of disciplines have been accused of historicist habits of thought. For instance, in the 1970s, the American philosophers of science Thomas S. Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend were frequently labelled as historicists because of their claim that assumptions guiding scientific enquiry can change over time (even though Kuhn believed paradigm changes to be much rarer events than critics worried

about incompatible modes of scientific rationality suggested).<sup>7</sup> Musicologists in the 1960s complained about a ‘doctrinal historicism’ dominating at Princeton’s Music Department (‘They admire a limited body of old music, mostly Mozart and the three B’s’),<sup>8</sup> while already in the 1930s historians had demonstrated how to use the term with polemical force in a controversy elicited by Carl Becker’s presidential address to the American Historical Association, ‘Everyman His Own Historian.’<sup>9</sup> And so one could go on, with linguists, literary theorists or theologians worried about a historicist mode of enquiry that ‘kills the soul and retains the corpse’ (by dissolving the Bible into an incoherent collection of historically unreliable fragments).<sup>10</sup> Easily recognizable as a threat to be averted, historicism was a convenient polemical device, which could be employed against a broad variety of thinking styles that were perceived as giving too much weight to historical arguments, facts or contexts. As a Union Theological Seminary professor succinctly put it in 1946: ‘Historicism is a bad philosophy resulting from a hypertrophical growth of the historical view.’<sup>11</sup>

## Existing scholarship

When, how and why did this originally German word, *Historismus*, travel to the United States? As Annette Wittkau and others have shown, *Historismus* emerged in mid-nineteenth-century Germany as a pejorative term for modes of historical thinking that were found wanting – though on different grounds. For instance, in 1857, the philosopher and publicist Rudolf Haym censured G. W. F. Hegel’s philosophy of history for being insufficiently based on empirical historical research. Nine years later, the philosopher and economist Eugen Dühring made an almost opposite argument by scoffing at the *Historismus* of scholars who devoted all their energy to increasing their knowledge of the past, without caring for a moment about the use or value of this knowledge to their readers. Characteristically, then, both authors associated historicism with a lack of ‘proper’ historical thinking or with a one-sidedness that was in need of correction.<sup>12</sup> From the late nineteenth century onwards, similar uses of the term can be found elsewhere in Europe, especially in countries with an intellectual orientation towards Germany.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the widespread of historicism as a polemical term, there are surprisingly few studies that trace how historicism has travelled between disciplines, nations or confessions. While, for instance, ‘rationalism’, ‘psychologism’ and ‘nihilism’ as intellectual terms of abuse have been subjected to extensive research, such studies

do not exist for historicism.<sup>14</sup> Although various authors admit that historicism was first and foremost a *Kampfbegriff*, the dominant trend in historical studies has been to take the term either as denoting a nineteenth-century ('Rankean') paradigm of historical scholarship or as shorthand for the problem of 'historical relativism' that was central to the early twentieth-century 'crisis of historicism'.

Although a range of factors contributed to historicism becoming a proper name instead of a derogatory term, the interpretation that equates historicism with nineteenth-century historical scholarship in the tradition of Leopold von Ranke has been developed most forcefully by the German historical theorist Jörn Rüsen and his students in the 1980s and 1990s. Emphasizing the methodological innovations ('source criticism') propagated by Ranke and his pupils, Rüsen argued that *Historismus* is best understood as the name of a paradigm in a Kuhnian sense of the word.<sup>15</sup> Historicism, for him, refers to a historicizing gaze that sought to understand ideas or practices in their historical particularity, paired with a commitment to doing this as 'scientifically' as possible (*das Prinzip der Wissenschaftlichkeit*).<sup>16</sup> In this reading, it was the historicist commitments of nineteenth-century German historians that made it possible for their discipline to 'professionalize' and to earn a worldwide reputation for being at the forefront of science. English-language studies following this interpretive strand include Frederick C. Beiser's *The German Historicist Tradition*. Although this book focuses on a period that saw the rise of historicism as a polemical device, it understands the term in a quasi-Rüsean manner as denoting a 'single, coherent and continuous intellectual tradition' in Wilhelmine Germany that was, most characteristically, committed to 'justifying the scientific stature of history'.<sup>17</sup>

Rather different has been a second strand of thinking, according to which historicism is not a Kuhnian paradigm, but a relativist stance that posed, and still poses, major challenges to normatively oriented fields like theology, ethics and philosophy. Otto Gerhard Oexle, most notably, has argued that historians should not focus their attention on the *term* – after all, what some called historicism, others preferred to label as relativism – but on the existential *problem* of historicism ('the all-encompassing historicization of the world, the human being and all aspects of his culture') that threatens to undermine universal standards in philosophy, theology and ethics.<sup>18</sup> In English-language scholarship, this perspective has been adopted by Thomas A. Howard<sup>19</sup> and Allan Megill, who in response to Howard suggests that a 'crisis of historicism,' usually associated with intellectual life in the Weimar Republic, manifested itself already in the 1830s, with the publication of David Friedrich Strauss's provocative piece of Biblical criticism, *Das Leben Jesu*.<sup>20</sup>

Both lines of research have turned out to be productive: both have generated fresh insight into the importance and contested nature of historical thinking in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Germany. However, precisely to the extent that these approaches have come to dominate the field, they have marginalized the question how the pejorative term that historicism was for most of its users prior to Rüsen and Oexle managed to travel from Berlin to New York, or from the pages of Protestant theology journals to the world of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory.

## Travelling concept

It might be fruitful, therefore, to study historicism as a 'travelling concept' – a phrase that refers to its travels across disciplines, countries and confessional divides (from a largely Protestant intellectual milieu into, for instance, Catholic philosophy textbooks).<sup>21</sup> According to cultural theorist Mieke Bal, who coined the term 'travelling concepts' in her 1999 Green College Lectures, concepts like historicism can hardly ever be pinpointed to specific cultural locations. They tend to travel 'between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods and between geographically dispersed academic communities'.<sup>22</sup> However, in doing so, some concepts earn more air miles than others. Some manage to reach far-away places, heavily loaded with luggage, while others travel lightly or stay relatively close to home. Some travel alone; others do so in groups. Applied to the case of historicism, this implies that historians cannot content themselves to tracing historicism's itineraries or to unravelling the manifold meanings associated with this essentially contested concept. It is just as important for them to study historicism's travel companions, be it other concepts, such as relativism and nihilism, or emotions like anxiety for what the German theologian Ernst Troeltsch fearfully called a stream of history 'without beginning, end and shore'.<sup>23</sup>

Studying historicism as a travelling concept is, of course, not an end in itself. We would like to think that such a project may serve at least two intellectual agendas. First, a rhetorical analysis of historicism as a *Kampfbegriff* (referring to what users of the term perceived as *dangerous* modes of relating to the past) may shed light on underlying philosophies of history (what these same users of the term believed a *beneficial* relation to the past to look like). Not unlike John Edward Toews and Mark Bevir, who have detected developmental modes of historical thinking in fields as diverse as architecture, law, philology and history,<sup>24</sup>

a study of historicism as invoked by psychoanalytic theorists, philosophers of science, musicologists, historians and theologians may unearth 'regimes of historicity' shared or disputed in a broad variety of contexts.<sup>25</sup> Historicism, in other words, is a suitable prism for an intellectual history of how people related to their pasts.<sup>26</sup>

Secondly, travelling concepts like historicism can make visible how fields that were institutionally independent and methodologically sometimes very different from each other nonetheless exchanged ideas, concepts or attitudes. A study of historicism's travels across disciplinary divides might therefore contribute to what Rens Bod and others call a 'postdisciplinary history of knowledge', characterized by a search for connections, transfers or 'flows' between fields of enquiry that are often studied in relative isolation from each other.<sup>27</sup> More specifically, by zooming in on fields like sociology and theology, which are conventionally classified under the social sciences and humanities, respectively, such a project may also illustrate how a rapprochement between the history of the humanities and the history of the social sciences such as proposed by Wolf Feuerhahn might look like.<sup>28</sup>

Accordingly, if this collection of essays approaches historicism as a travelling concept, it organizes this enquiry around a couple of closely related questions. When, how and why did historicism travel from one discipline to another, or from Europe to North America? Why was the term passed down from generation to generation, for instance in the field of Jewish studies? Who were historicism's travel companions and what kind of conceptual or emotional baggage was associated with this pejorative term?

## Outline of the volume

In the spirit of Mieke Bal, this volume addresses these questions in a deliberately exploratory way. It does not offer a systematic survey of historicism's travels across time and space. Neither does the volume aim for comprehensive coverage of disciplines, countries, languages or confessions. Instead, it presents a set of original papers that, each in their own way, touch on aspects of the travel metaphor. While all the chapters deal with transmission of historicism across time and space, some of them focus on diachronic transmission within single intellectual traditions. Others zoom in on influential thinkers to enquire how, especially around mid-century, historicism acquired meanings and connotations that later generations kept associating with it. Still other contributions examine historicism's travel



companions – emotions of anxiety, for instance, that contributed to rather aggressive styles of debate. Last but not least, there are chapters that seek to answer the question posed above: How did twentieth-century Americans come to appropriate German notions of *Historismus*? For the reader's convenience, we have arranged the chapters into four clusters, focusing respectively on historicism's travels through time (I), travels through space (II), and travel companions (III), with a final cluster exploring how mid-twentieth-century intellectuals, especially in Europe, tried to travel 'beyond historicism' (IV).

The two chapters that make up cluster I resemble each other insofar as they trace long-term transmissions of historicism within a single tradition. Focusing on Jewish studies, David N. Myers discusses three generations of scholars who responded rather critically to historicism. Through the case studies of Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig and Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Myers identifies three moments of 'crisis', each of which reflected a larger state of intellectual and political perplexity and touched on epistemological, theological as well as ideological questions. In his chapter on liberal Protestant theologians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Gary Dorrien shows that historicism has been central to liberal theological concerns since the days of Friedrich Schleiermacher – even though the term itself emerged only later. Historicism touched upon all the major issues on the liberal agenda: biblical criticism, historical development (evolution), the relation between science and religion and the threat of historical relativism. By analysing the role of historicism in these debates, Dorrien shows that the concept was able to take on new meanings in new contexts, while at the same time deriving part of its authority from a long tradition of liberal theologizing.

Cluster II presents two examples of what we call 'travel through space', or intellectual transfer between Europe (Germany) and North America (United States). Focusing on the field of sociology, George Steinmetz's chapter traces how both 'historicism' and 'positivism' travelled from Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany to twentieth-century America. Often, though not always, the terms travelled together: they shaped each other's meanings in dialogues that took place across the Atlantic. Chapter 4, by Adriaan van Veldhuizen, shows that different notions of historicism caused quite a bit of confusion among American historians in the 1930s. According to Van Veldhuizen, there were at least two routes along which historicism found its way into American historians' vocabulary, each with distinct features. If anything, this suggests that analysing historicism's travels can help explain why people kept associating historicism with different threats.

Cluster III zooms in on travel companions. Focusing on the rhetorical use of historicism as an emotionally charged term, Herman Paul argues that historicism was often imbued with fear. Drawing on the case of Dutch intellectuals between the 1870s and the 1970s, he examines how these authors used historicism to frame perceived dangers, appeal to anxieties broadly shared among their audiences and depict the intellectual landscape as a battlefield with dangerous worldviews roaming around. In her chapter on Raymond Aron, Sophie Marcotte-Chenard adds that historicism was a *Schlagwort* often associated with 'relativism'. If the famous 'crisis of historicism' in interwar Europe shows anything, it is that relativism had become one of historicism's most inseparable travel companions. Interestingly, this did not imply the end of historicism: for Aron, the 'crisis of historicism' rather served as a catalyst for a renewed reflection on reason and judgement in history.

However, as the fourth and final cluster demonstrates, this was not true for all of Aron's contemporaries. Because of historicism's travel companions – be it relativism or quietism in the face of political disaster – quite a few mid-twentieth-century intellectuals began to distance themselves from it, arguing instead for a mode of scholarship 'beyond historicism' (*jenseits des Historismus*). In a chapter on Friedrich Meinecke, one of the most influential authors on the subject, Audrey Borowski argues that the German historian actively (though unintentionally) contributed to the decline of the historicist tradition in twentieth-century Europe. He did so by making visible internal tensions within historicist thinking and by demonstrating a profound inability to relate the idealism of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Leopold von Ranke to the mundane realities of actual historical research. Instead of reinvigorating historicism, then, Meinecke illustrated the dead ends that historicism had reached by the mid-twentieth century. In a different vein, another influential author, Karl Löwith, also illustrated the inability of mid-twentieth-century intellectuals to identify with historicism. Yet as Bruno Godefroy shows in the final chapter of this volume, Löwith was not a critic of historicism in the way that, for instance, Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin were. Instead, Löwith sought to 'historicize historicism' – a phrase that nicely captures Löwith's programme of moving beyond historicism without relegating it to the dustbin of history.

A more voluminous collection of essays might have included chapters on different itineraries (especially outside of Europe and North America), on 'roads not taken', on other 'isms' with which historicism was frequently associated, or perhaps on travel writing. Fortunately, the ambition of this volume is not to be comprehensive. It rather seeks to convince readers that historicism can

profitably be studied as a *Kampfbegriff* – in addition, rather than in opposition to more traditional lines of research – that this pejorative term found its way into a broad variety of fields, in different geographical areas, and that historicism can therefore productively be studied as a travelling concept. Readers are invited to join the journey, by reading the chapters that follow and by continuing along the path that we have embarked on.

## Notes

- 1 Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 6.
- 2 Ibid., 126.
- 3 Ibid., 13.
- 4 Dylan Evans, 'Historicism and Lacanian Theory', *Radical Philosophy* 79 (1996): 35.
- 5 P. Steven Sangren, 'Psychoanalysis and Its Resistances in Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*: Lessons for Anthropology', *Ethos* 32, no. 1 (2004): 110–22.
- 6 Roddey Reid, 'Foucault in America: Biography, "Culture War," and the New Consensus', *Cultural Critique* 35 (1996–1997): 188; Christopher E. Forth, 'Cultural History and New Cultural History', in *Encyclopedia of European Social History from 1350 to 2000*, ed. Peter N. Stearns, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2001), 88–9.
- 7 Ernan McMullin, 'History and Philosophy of Science: A Marriage of Convenience?', in *PSA 1974: Proceedings of the 1974 Biennial Meeting Philosophy of Science Association*, ed. R. S. Cohen et al. (Dordrecht: Springer, 1976), 587. More examples are provided in John H. Zammito, *A Nice Derangement of Epistemes: Post-Positivism in the Study of Science from Quine to Latour* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 91–5.
- 8 Joseph Kerman, "'The Proper Study of Music": A Reply', *Perspectives of New Music* 2, no. 1 (1963): 152. The three B's are, of course, Bach, Beethoven and Brahms.
- 9 As documented by Adriaan van Veldhuizen in his contribution to this volume.
- 10 Richard Kroner, 'History and Historicism', *Journal of Bible and Religion* 14, no. 3 (1946): 132.
- 11 Ibid., 131.
- 12 Annette Wittkau, *Historismus: Zur Geschichte des Begriffs und des Problems*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994), 34, 40.
- 13 Herman Paul, *Het moeras van de geschiedenis: Nederlandse debatten over historisme* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2012).
- 14 Joshua Bennett, 'A History of "Rationalism" in Victorian Britain', *Modern Intellectual History* 15, no. 1 (2018): 63–91; Martin Kusch, *Psychologism: A Case*

- Study in the Sociology of Philosophical Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1995), esp. 95–121; Arie M. Dubnov, “‘Those New Men of the Sixties’: Nihilism in the Liberal Imagination,” *Rethinking History* 19, no. 1 (2015): 18–40; James Chappel, ‘Nihilism and the Cold War: The Catholic Reception of Nihilism between Nietzsche and Adenauer,’ *Rethinking History* 19, no. 1 (2015): 95–110.
- 15 Jörn Rüsen, *Konfigurationen des Historismus: Studien zur deutschen Wissenschaftskultur* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993), 36–7.
  - 16 Friedrich Jaeger and Jörn Rüsen, *Geschichte des Historismus: Eine Einführung* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1992), 8.
  - 17 Frederick C. Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 6, 7.
  - 18 Otto Gerhard Oexle, ‘Krise des Historismus, Krise der Wirklichkeit: Eine Problemgeschichte der Moderne’, in *Krise des Historismus, Krise der Wirklichkeit: Wissenschaft, Kunst und Literatur 1880–1932*, ed. Otto Gerhard Oexle (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 26. See also Otto Gerhard Oexle, *Geschichtswissenschaft im Zeichen des Historismus: Studien zu Problemgeschichten der Moderne* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996).
  - 19 Thomas Albert Howard, *Religion and the Rise of Historicism: W. M. L. de Wette, Jacob Burckhardt, and the Theological Origins of Nineteenth-Century Historical Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Howard acknowledges, however, that apart from ‘crisis historicism’ as defined by Oexle something like ‘classical historicism’ in Rüsen’s sense of the word existed (13).
  - 20 Allan Megill, ‘Why Was There a Crisis of Historicism?’ *History and Theory* 36, no. 3 (1997): 420–1. For a different view, see Herman Paul, ‘Who Suffered from the Crisis of Historicism? A Dutch Example’, *History and Theory* 49, no. 2 (2010): 169–93.
  - 21 Examples of the latter are discussed in Herman Paul, ‘Religion and the Crisis of Historicism: Protestant and Catholic Perspectives’, *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 4, no. 2 (2010): 172–94.
  - 22 Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 24.
  - 23 Ernst Troeltsch, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme*, vol. 1 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1922), 573.
  - 24 John Edward Toews, *Becoming Historical: Cultural Reformation and Public Memory in Early Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); *Historicism and the Human Sciences in Victorian Britain*, ed. Mark Bevir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). See also Joshua Bennett, *God and Progress: Religion and History in British Intellectual Culture, 1845–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).
  - 25 We borrow this phrase from François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, trans. Saskia Brown (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015).

- 26 As advocated in Herman Paul, 'Relations to the Past: A Research Agenda for Historical Theorists,' *Rethinking History* 19, no. 3 (2015): 450–8.
- 27 Rens Bod et al., 'The Flow of Cognitive Goods: A Historiographical Framework for the Study of Epistemic Transfer,' *Isis* 110, no. 3 (2019): 483–96.
- 28 Wolf Feuerhahn, 'Les sciences humaines et sociales: des disciplines du contexte?,' *Revue d'histoire des sciences humaines* 30 (2017): 7–29.

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