# The spectre of historicism: a discourse of fear

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5

# The spectre of historicism: A discourse of fear

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## Abstract

Historians of historicism have done a lot to uncover the various *meanings* associated with the term. By contrast, the *rhetorical uses* of this emotionally charged term, especially in contexts of controversy, have never received systematic attention. This chapter argues that such a rhetorical approach can bring to light patterns that have so far remained invisible. Drawing on the case of Dutch intellectuals between the 1870s and the 1970s, it examines how people 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. This chapter thereby shows the fruitfulness of extending conventional history of ideas approaches with a rhetorical perspective sensitive to the emotional aspects of polemical language.

## Introduction

On a Tuesday in November 1952, the old St Peter's Church in Utrecht resounded with Psalm singing.[1] A large audience of mostly Protestant pastors, social workers, journalists and academics had gathered, partly to celebrate the half-centenary of the Christian Social Congress – a conference in 1891 that had given a major impetus to the social movement in the Netherlands – but partly also to explore how the movement's concern for social justice could take on new forms in postwar society. The conference programme spoke boldly about the Kingdom of God and the needs of the world. Yet the tone of most speakers was not nearly as resolute and self-confident as had been the case in 1891. Back then, poverty and hardship had been condemned as contrary to a God-given social order.

'In general, aberration from these laws and ordinances, decreed by God to his creatures, is the cause of all social abuses.'[2] But in the early 1950s, at a time when social life was beset with unrest because of experienced and anticipated societal changes, such firm language no longer seemed appropriate.

Henk Berkhof, most notably, a leading figure in the country's largest Protestant church, used his keynote lecture for a critical retrospective on the 'ordinances' and 'principles' beloved by late nineteenth Reformed (*gereformeerde*) theologians such as Abraham Kuyper. It is one thing, he said, to try to develop a Christian view on social issues like labour and poverty, but another to think that such a Christian view can be formulated once and for all. Christian social ethics cannot be timeless. Precisely because it deals with changing social realities, it is 'dependent on place, time, people, and situations'. Berkhof's lecture therefore resulted in a plea for humility. Every generation, he said, has to read the Bible anew, trying to discern what is important 'here and now'. To which the speaker added, in a self-reflective moment, that this cautious stance itself was a product of historical circumstances, too. 'We feel,' said Berkhof, 'that we belong to a different age, not the age of development, but the age of eradication [*ontworteling*] … '[3]

This was not a feeling shared by all attendees. The discussion following Berkhof's lecture had hardly begun when Herman Dooyeweerd, a neo-Calvinist philosopher at the Free University, accused the speaker of 'dangerous historicism'. Under influence of 'the historicist zeitgeist', Berkhof was conveying a 'relativist and historicist' message, which would undermine the very ordinances and principles that the founding fathers of the Free University, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, had identified as footholds against historical relativism. In the second round of the debate, the next day, another neo-Calvinist philosopher, Sytse Ulbe Zuidema, joined Dooyeweerd in criticizing the speaker for defending a historicism 'that only knows situations'. This situationalism amounted, 'if not to nihilism, then at least to relativism and historicism', or so an angry Zuidema asserted.[4]

The sources do not reveal how Berkhof, the irenic rector of the theological seminary of the Netherlands Reformed Church, responded to these neo-Calvinist objections. Berkhof's publications, however, show that he himself also had strong reservations about historicism. Historicism, Berkhof wrote in 1958, is a 'weary scepticism', unable to detect any meaning in the historical process. 'For all ideals, norms, and attributions of meaning are products of their own time; they do not stand above history, but are results of and elements in the historical process. Who would be able to find stability in this endless process?'

As late as 1971, Berkhof would argue that such relativizing of norms and values is a deadlock. 'We need to be liberated … from such absolutized historicism.'[5]

## The history of historicism

I start with this vignette because it illustrates in nice detail to what extent historicism in the 1950s served as a polemical term, charged with pejorative connotations and emotional power. If historicism could be perceived as breeding nihilism, an 'unstable signifier' of which historian Nitzan Lebovic has argued that 'it carries the semantic structure of an accusation',[6] then historicism might be interpreted similarly, not as a position that people claimed themselves, but as an accusation. For the Christian Social Congress attendees under the vaults of Utrecht's St Peter's Church at least, historicism was a word of warning, referring to a threat for which Dutch Protestants had reasons to be frightened. Although others were less fearful of historicism – some historians in the 1970s even proudly identified as historicists[7] – it is fair to say that Berkhof, Dooyeweerd and Zuidema were representative of large segments of Dutch intelligentsia insofar as they used historicism as a derogative term imbued with emotional subtexts.

Although the history of historicism is not exactly an understudied topic, these emotional subtexts – fear, anger, worry – have never been taken very seriously. Arguably, this is largely because scholars tend to approach historicism *conceptually*, with a dominant interest in the *meanings* associated with the term. This is most evident among scholars who try to turn historicism into a useful analytical concept. Friedrich Jaeger and Jörn Rüsen, for instance, define historicism as a nineteenth-century tradition of treating historical scholarship as a *verstehende Geisteswissenschaft*.[8] Similarly, Frederick Beiser equates it with an epistemological tradition of legitimizing history as a science.[9] Precisely to the extent that such definitions try to turn a derogatory term into a more descriptive label, they evade the question why historicism for most twentieth-century users of the term was so emotionally charged. More promising, in this respect, is a line of research advocated by Otto Gerhard Oexle and his students. Building on earlier work by Georg G. Iggers and others,[10] Oexle *cum suis* have meticulously examined what the word 'historicism' meant to early and mid-twentieth-century German intellectuals.[11] But although this second approach has much more to say about dangers and threats than the first one, it still focuses predominantly on what historicism *meant* to those who warned against it. Historicism, in other words, has been studied almost consistently through conceptual prisms.

What would be the benefit of broadening the scope of enquiry by drawing attention to *rhetorical* uses of a term charged with emotional connotations? Judging by how Dutch intellectuals from the 1870s to the 1970s spoke, wrote, argued, quarrelled and sermonized about historicism, such an approach might bring to light patterns that have so far remained invisible. As I will argue in this chapter, it can reveal similarities in how people framed their perceived dangers, rhetorically appealed to anxieties shared by their audiences and drew on language of 'isms' in depicting the intellectual landscape as a battlefield with dangerous worldviews roaming around, eager to make victims. So, while the beginning of all wisdom may be that historicism meant different things to different people, this should not be the end: the intellectual life did not exist of meaning alone.

In what follows I will address three questions bearing upon the rhetoric of historicism, thereby focusing on the twentieth-century Netherlands (a country intellectually oriented on Germany, but distinct enough to add a fresh perspective to the largely Germany-focused secondary literature). First, if Dutch authors used historicism as a word of warning, what were their objects of fear? What were they afraid of? Secondly, what do these fears reveal about the authors' preferred attitudes towards history? What, in other words, was the *logos* behind their *pathos*, or the argument behind their rhetoric? Finally, in what language did Dutch critics of historicism articulate their worries? Where did historicism come from and to what broader discourses did it belong?

## Sources and methods

Before turning to these questions, however, I will say a few words about sources and methods. My sources are printed texts (books, journals, newspapers), occasionally supplemented with unpublished archival material (letters, notes). The first selection of relevant material has been made with digital search techniques. This selection has subsequently been expanded through close reading of other publications by authors identified as critics of historicism. This double strategy has yielded hundreds of texts – lectures, newspaper articles, book reviews and so on – in fields as diverse as musicology, architecture, sociology, theology and philosophy, from the 1870s until well into the 1970s. My analysis of this material has been published in 2012 as *Het moeras van de geschiedenis* – a book that examines in considerable detail what historicism meant to various groups of Dutch commentators.[12]

Although the current chapter draws on research done for the book, it expands on this earlier publication in trying to move beyond the question what historicism *meant*. In revisiting Dutch perceptions of historicism through a *rhetorical* prism, my aim is to enrich the history of historicism with insights drawn from rhetorical history – a branch of research that focuses on how 'symbols and systems of symbols' express and shape people's 'beliefs, values, attitudes and action[s].'[13] In this line of research, emotions are never far away. As Kathleen Turner emphasizes: 'the fears, the anxieties, the frustrations, the aggressive impulses of a society are the very stuff of rhetorical studies'.[14] Obviously, emotions *as such* are not accessible to historical enquiry: we cannot possibly know what Berkhof felt when Dooyeweerd and Zuidema attacked him after his lecture in Utrecht. So what rhetorical historians study is not emotional states of mind, but what William Reddy calls *emotives*: textual expressions like 'I fear' and 'I am worried' that are, on the one hand, descriptions of emotional states, but also, on the other, speech acts that seek to persuade an audience by using an emotional register.[15] The rhetorical perspective adopted in this chapter will focus on such emotives – on fears and worries that were explicitly brought up in Dutch reflections on historicism – beginning with the question what objects of fear these emotives denoted.

## Objects of fear

Ernst Troeltsch's 1922 lecture at Leiden University – a preview of his soon-to-appear book, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* – is a good place to start, as it elicited extensive responses from various corners. In a packed lecture hall, Troeltsch told his audience that historicism amounted to a 'fundamental historicization of intellectual life'.[16] Was this a promise, a threat, a *fait accompli* or an ideological agenda? Dutch commentators did not agree. In the liberal Protestant bulwark that was Leiden's faculty of theology, the view took hold that 'historicization of intellectual life' in Troeltsch's sense of the word was a stance cultivated by all branches of modern historical scholarship, the history of religion included. While insisting on the need to interpret the past in its own terms, it cultivated virtues of accuracy, carefulness and impartiality. This was the very air that Leiden students breathed: the university was well-known for its critical historical ethos, in Biblical studies and history of religions just as in church history and national history.[17] If this historicism posed a threat, it consisted in forgetting that the historian's perspective can never claim monopoly: a preacher

in Leiden's St Peter's Church could and had to say more than a professor of Old Testament studies in the Academy Building.

Thus, when Troeltsch's host in Leiden, the young theologian Karel Roessingh, spoke about historicism, the term referred to sceptical questions of the kind: Why would Christianity as preached from Dutch Protestant pulpits be truer than other religions from other cultures? Students only need to take a course in the history of religion, said Roessingh, to be infused with 'a substantial dose of doubt about the superiority of one's own twentieth-century Christianity over the religiousness of the Torajas discussed [in class] or that of Egyptians in the Eighteenth Dynasty'.[18] Historicism, for Roessingh, denoted an overdose of such scepticism – a relativist stance that nobody actively encouraged, but could easily develop during students' courses of study, gnawing at their moral and religious beliefs. Similarly, Roessingh's students Willem Banning and Heije Faber associated historicism with the stance of a passive observer who engages in historical studies without daring to stake a position or issue a judgement. Both insisted on the need to make personal choices and develop what Faber called an 'active attitude' – that is, vigorous commitment to a moral-religious cause.[19] So, for these Leiden theologians, historicism represented the danger of losing oneself in reflection – a perhaps not altogether imaginary danger in Leiden's academic context, but still a danger that most students managed to avoid.

Rhetorical framings of historicism as a danger looming at the horizon, visible but not yet actual, were even more explicitly offered at another faculty of theology, in Groningen, where so-called 'ethical' theologians sought to steer a constructive middle course between liberalism and orthodoxy or, more concretely, between Troeltsch and Karl Barth – two names that were on everyone's lips during much of the 1920s and 1930s. Groningen theologians like Willem Jan Aalders and Theo Haitjema followed Barth in portraying Troeltsch as an incarnation of dangerous historicism – theology reduced to historical study of religion – but hesitated about Barth's explicitly anti-historicist alternative, in which divine revelation seemed entirely disconnected from human history. Both their own publications and the PhD dissertations they supervised testify to Aalders's and Haitjema's reluctance about historicism and anti-historicism alike (though Haitjema, the youngest of the two, was slightly more 'Barthian' than Aalders). In this context, historicism again appeared as a danger on the horizon. 'If Ernst Troeltsch is your man,' wrote Haitjema in 1931 to a younger colleague, 'then imitate him, that is, examine carefully where Troeltsch's historicism had to end up, and did end up, even though he preferably obscured this end for himself and others alike.'[20] Similarly, in response to a Leiden theologian, Haitjema wrote: 'I

cannot see it otherwise than that a theologian who has noddingly walked one mile with Troeltsch will have to go on two miles under his guidance and even to continue in his footsteps until the bitter end.'[21]

Here we encounter the rhetoric figure of the slippery slope as it pops up in many of the sources consulted for this chapter ('If you take a first step in this direction, you'll end up in dangerous historicism'). It takes the form, more specifically, of a logical slippery slope argument, neatly corresponding to what Alfred Sidgwick, more than a century ago, called the 'objection to a thin end of a wedge' ('If we once begin to take a certain course there is no knowing where we shall be able to stop with any show of consistency; there would be no reason for stopping anywhere in particular, and we should be led on, step by step, into action or opinions that we all agree to call undesirable or untrue').[22]

Recognizing that charges of historicism were typically premised on a logic of slippery slopes subsequently allows us to see why this derogative term was used especially in exchanges between relatively kindred spirits. When Dooyeweerd polemicized against historicism, he preferably attacked fellow-Protestants like Berkhof and the more progressive wings of his Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (*Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*).[23] Likewise, Haitjema brought the charge against fellow 'ethical' theologians, just as the neo-Kantian philosopher and theologian Jacob Leonard Snethlage struck out against perceived historicist tendencies in liberal and ethical circles – not in the orthodox camp that was largely beyond his radar.[24] Even Arnold de Hartog, a gifted debater known for his rallies against the 'atheist' freethinkers movement, directed his combative energy on enemies close to home. When in 1908 De Hartog founded a journal with the rather unique mission of combatting historicism and empiricism, the first of these 'isms' turned out to refer primarily to orthodox Protestants who used terms like 'facts of salvation' in speaking about the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus, thereby capturing divine action in the factual language of historical scholarship. Consistent with the logic of slippery slopes, De Hartog's criticism was not that orthodox believers speaking about 'facts of salvation' had ceased to believe in a supernatural God; the point was that he perceived them as making an impermissible step in the direction of such a dangerous position.

This allows for a twofold answer to the question what critics of historicism actually feared. While their *objects* of fear were often far away, looming at some distant horizon, the *triggers* of those worries were usually much closer to home, among fellow theologians, sometimes even members of the same church branch. Typically, the distant and the near-by were connected through slippery slope

arguments of the sort we already encountered in the introduction, in Zuidema's criticism of Berkhof: 'If you say that each generation has to read the Bible for themselves, then you will end up in nihilist historicism.'

## Underlying arguments

To examine this rhetorical figure in greater depth, I turn to my second question: What was the *logos* behind the *pathos*, or the argument behind the rhetoric of slippery slopes? Let's return to Troeltsch's 1922 lecture at Leiden University, which was attended not only by theologians, but also by Johan Huizinga, the soon-to-be-famous author of *The Waning of the Middle Ages*. In response to Troeltsch's talk, the historian made some brief notes – never published, tucked away in his personal papers – that took the form of a series of questions:

1. Does your attitude towards life and spirit correspond to what Troeltsch calls historicism?
2. Do you in your historical thinking regard historical humanity as one large individual?
3. Do you search in history for solid points for the present?
4. Does history make you relativistic? (nothing absolute, nothing independent)
5. Does the epistemology of history make you sceptical?[25]

Huizinga's answer to these questions can be found elsewhere, in his lecture notes: 'Whoever knows [one's] life to be limited by [one's] own personality and context, and bound to the past as well as the future, has no reason to be anxious about history. He tries to understand in time something [that lies] behind the time. The eternal imperfection, the eternal aspiration.'[26]

These words, enigmatic as they may seem, do not only show that Troeltsch's lecture elicited different responses (though Huizinga's musings were as peppered with emotives as were Roessingh's). More importantly, they convey that Huizinga believed that anxiety about a Troeltschean 'historicization of intellectual life' was not unavoidable. Whether or not there were reasons to be anxious depended on metaphysical assumptions about history, the self and the human moral condition. Huizinga seemed to imply that a hermeneutic awareness of one's being situated in time and place is a problem only on the assumption that such situatedness amounts to a limitation or, more precisely, a failure to anchor one's ideas, beliefs or practices in transhistorical certainties.

If we survey the broad variety of complaints about historicism put forward by Dutch authors in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such longing for transhistorical certainties turns out to be quite rare. Despite secondary literature suggesting that interwar critics of historicism desperately tried to defend what they believed to be timeless truths,[27] not even theologians conform to this picture. Among Dutch theologians, Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye was one of only few who reported something close to what Richard J. Bernstein calls the 'Cartesian anxiety' ('Either there is some support for our being, a fixed foundation for our knowledge, or we cannot escape the forces of darkness that envelop us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos').[28]

Instead of contrasting timeless truths with historical contingencies, most Dutch commentators thought in terms of *balances* – balances between historical knowledge and religious belief, balances between historical accuracy and aesthetic achievement, or balances between historical development and moral-political order. Crucial is that these balances were perceived as getting distorted if too much emphasis was laid upon historical change, historical facts or historical accuracy. Gerardus van der Leeuw, another Groningen theologian, offers a case in point. His 1919 book *Historical Christianity* warned at length against a historicist reading of the Bible, characterized by an overdose of sensitivity to questions of historical factuality (Was Jesus really born in Bethlehem?). With equal force, however, Van der Leeuw distanced himself from the 'anti-historicism' that he encountered in rationalist thinkers like Lessing, for whom Jesus' birth in Bethlehem had no significance at all. Theology suffered, not only when its practitioners emphasized the historical too much, but also when they paid it too little respect.[29]

Such efforts at balancing can be found also among non-theologians. For instance, in his 1941 reflections on the state of Dutch literary studies, the Nijmegen professor Gerard Brom declared to have no objections against colleagues adopting historical methods and using archival sources in writing the history of Dutch literature. But if they reduced the enterprise to collecting historical data, at the expense of aesthetic evaluation, the result was nothing more than 'meagre historicism'.[30] Similarly, Brom's spouse, Willemien Brom-Struick, a gifted musician, argued that it was no 'dead historicism' to perform sixteenth-century music on period instruments like the lute.[31] Historical accuracy did not need to compromise on aesthetic beauty – even though it would take a couple of decades before the early music movement could convince its critics that a balance between the two was feasible.

The rhetorical trope of balancing was even more prominent in a 1946 debate on the decolonization of the Netherlands Indies. Sieuwert Bruins Slot, chief editor of a Protestant newspaper, criticized supporters of an independent Indonesia for undermining a God-given political order with historicist appeals to 'the demands of the time' or even, in biblical language, 'the signs of the times'. This led Gerard van Walsum, another prominent Protestant journalist, to argue that Bruins Slot himself was advocating a historicist political theology by identifying moral-political standards with a nineteenth-century colonial order. But if you accuse me of 'static historicism', responded Bruins Slot to Van Walsum, I accuse you of 'dynamic historicism'.[32] This situation was not unlike the one in Utrecht's St Peter's Church, a couple of years later. All quarrelling parties dissociated themselves from historicism, but did so in different ways, simply because they had different views on how a balance between historical sensitivity and moral-political reasoning would look like.

What these examples show, apart from illustrating once again that Protestant authors were rather prominent voices in Dutch debates about historicism, is that arguments behind charges of historicism did not necessarily draw on a logic of timeless truths versus historical contingencies. More prominent, in the Dutch case, was a thinking in terms of balances, with ongoing debate on what the balance precisely entailed, in terms of both *what* had to be balanced and *how* this could be done. It was these balances that served as frames of reference for accusations of 'going too far' in emphasizing historical change, accuracy or factuality. This is to say that historicism served as a *deictic* term – a term that assesses a situation in relation to a deictic centre that embodies the norm. Although the authors discussed in this chapter defined this deictic centre in different ways, they all explicitly or implicitly identified it with a balance, distortion of which they denounced in terms of historicism. So, whereas a traditional history of ideas approach faces a plethora of meanings attached to the term 'historicism', the rhetorical perspective adopted in this chapter allows us to discern behind these manifold meanings a pattern of deictic reasoning.

## Language of 'isms'

So far, we have seen that historicism was mostly perceived as a danger, still far away, but threatening everyone who moved a step too far in its direction. The image of a step too far fits the logic of slippery slopes popular among critics of historicism, but also points to the deictic character of historicism.

Like its negative counterpart, anti-historicism, the term denoted disturbance of a precarious balance. However, not everyone who cared about balanced historical thinking employed language of historicism. Catholic philosophers, most notably, hardly spoke about historicism, despite the fact that balancing historical distance and philosophical proximity to Thomas Aquinas was a key challenge for all neo-Thomist thinkers. A rhetorical examination of historicism is therefore not complete without an attempt to answer the question: Where did historicism come from and to what discourses did it belong? Did Catholic philosophers draw on other languages than their Protestant colleagues?

In an academic culture that was largely oriented on Germany, especially before the Second World War, it almost goes without saying that historicism was a German loanword. Early users of the term said as much when they referred to 'the disease that the Germans … call by the appropriate name of "*historicism*"' or to 'what the Germans call the period of historicism'.[33] Although these are generic references, closer examination of intellectual origins reveals that, among academics at least, language of historicism travelled to no small degree through discipline-specific channels. Whereas Protestant theologians in the interwar years heavily quoted Troeltsch and Barth, philosophers like Dooyeweerd and Snethlage mainly drew on neo-Kantian thinkers. Historians in their turn often referred to Friedrich Meinecke's *Die Entstehung des Historismus*. Insofar as these are representative examples, they suggest that Dutch academics borrowed the term, not primarily from each other, but from discipline-specific German sources. The term did travel, however, from Dutch academic jargon to the vocabulary of politicians and journalists – or even novelists, in the case of Pieter Hendrik van Moerkerken, the author of a novel featuring two friends who sit down in an orchard to discuss 'the historicism that our culture suffers from'.[34] The politicians who disagreed about the Netherlands Indies most likely picked up the term from Dooyeweerd, just as museum director Adriaan Pit drew on historians of art and architecture in warning against 'historicism pushed too far' (i.e. staying as closely as possible to the original in rebuilding the Leiden city hall after its destruction by fire in 1929).[35]

Why, then, did Dutch neo-Thomists, with one notable exception, refrain from using language of historicism? Briefly put, their intellectual orientation was southward, not eastward. Most of them had close connections to the Higher Institute of Philosophy in Leuven, which until the early 1930s was entirely French-speaking. Neither the Leuven neo-Scholastics, as they preferred to call themselves, nor their Dutch admirers did refer more than in passing to historicism – not because they were unfamiliar with the intellectual and existential dilemmas

of their Protestant colleagues, but because they largely discussed these in terms of 'tradition', 'traditionalism', 'breach of tradition' and 'lack of respect for tradition'.[36] Also, since the so-called modernist crisis, modernism instead of historicism had been the preferred Catholic invective for those found guilty of overemphasizing historical change or development. (The exception that proves the rule was Karel Bellon, a Leuven-trained philosophy professor at Nijmegen, who more than any of his Dutch or Flemish colleagues engaged with German Protestant theologians and philosophers, thereby bridging discourses that existed largely separate from each other.[37])

However, the confessional divide loses much of its significance when we realize that historicism was seldom used alone. Zuidema was one among many who connected historicism to relativism, existentialism, atheism and nihilism,[38] just as De Hartog was far from alone in simultaneously attacking historicism and empiricism. For many of the authors discussed in this chapter, historicism was part of a larger vocabulary of 'isms'. Bellon and Dooyeweerd warned against psychologism and sociologism, too. When Philip Kohnstamm assumed his Amsterdam lectureship in 1907 with a talk on the dangers besieging philosophy, he discussed not only historicism, but also the threats embodied by materialism, naturalism and positivism. Historicism, in other words, belonged to a broader collection of 'isms', which helps explain the occurrence of combinations like 'relativist historicism' and 'the historicist-empiricist orientation of the last half a century'.[39] Especially in the interwar *Weltanschauungskämpfe* – polemics between competing 'worldviews', with all the Idealist baggage of that term – historicism was one of many 'isms' that were used as words of warning, especially to kindred spirits, fellow-believers or members of the same tradition who seemed to take a step too far in dangerous directions.[40]

## Conclusion

These last words touch upon issues far beyond the focus of this chapter: the military rhetoric that was used in mapping the intellectual landscape, the aggressive styles of polemicizing that were customary especially among philosophers and theologians, and the emotions of fear or anger that were fuelled by such rhetorical conventions. By way of conclusion, I can only say that the rhetorical perspective adopted in this chapter seems a promising one for researchers interested in broadening the range of questions typically raised with regard to intellectual life in the period under discussion. How could it

be that merciless polemicists like Zuidema were held in high regard, at least among kindred spirits? What sort of intellectual culture allowed for a former prime minister demanding Free University students to swear an oath of loyalty to 'Reformed principles' in the Amsterdam Vondel Park?[41] What was the appeal of polemics revolving around 'isms' that, in 1936, even working-class people from The Hague showed up in great numbers to hear Dooyeweerd address the dangers of historicism?[42]

A couple of years ago, Elías Palti suggested that historicism should be treated, not as an idea or concept, but as a language in John Pocock's and Quentin Skinner's sense of the word: 'the intellectual soil and the set of assumptions underlying a given order of discourse' that help explain, not only what an author said, but also 'how it was possible for him or her to say what he or she said'.[43] In a sense, this chapter ties in with Palti's proposal by drawing attention to rhetorical conventions and discursive repertoires that travelled across geographical and disciplinary borders, most notably from the German *Geisteswissenschaften* to Dutch philosophy and theology. However, the rhetorical perspective that this chapter has adopted is even richer than Palti's history of languages perspective. By treating historicism as a derogative term charged with emotional baggage, a rhetorical perspective is able to explain why historicism came to serve as what one German historian called 'a struggle-concept, attacked, asserted, discarded, befogged in the tumult of countless discussions and polemics'.[44] Also, by examining emotives like 'I fear' and 'I am worried', this chapter has been able to identify a rhetoric of slippery slopes popular among Dutch critics of historicism. Closer analysis of this rhetoric has revealed that 'historicism' was a deictic term, used in relation to the deictic centre of a precarious balance between historical knowledge and religious belief, historical accuracy and aesthetic achievement, or historical development and moral-political order.

If this makes sense, then a search for patterns in or beneath the variety of meanings associated with historicism does not have to focus on the *langue* underlying the *parole*. Even in its actual rhetorical usage, historicism was often used in similar ways, to frame a danger, to appeal to anxieties shared by the audience and to advocate 'a step back' to restore a balance endangered by overemphasis on historical facts, change or accuracy. From a rhetorical point of view, the musicians who quarrelled about the early music movement and its commitment to using period instruments were engaged in similar controversies as Berkhof, Dooyeweerd and Zuidema at the 1952 Christian Social Conference in Utrecht.

## Notes

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2 J. A. Wormser, *Proces-verbaal van het sociaal congres, gehouden te Amsterdam den 9, 10, 11 en 12 november 1891* (Amsterdam: Höveker & Zoon, 1892), 361.

3 *Proces verbaal christelijk sociale conferentie 1952 gehouden te Utrecht op 4, 5, 6 en 7 november 1952* (Utrecht: Libertas, [1953?]), 51, 53.

4 Ibid., 83, 82, 94, 95.

5 H. Berkhof, *Christus, de zin der geschiedenis* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1958), 25; N. N., 'Historisme en neo-marxisme bedreiging Schriftgezag: Prof. dr. H. Berkhof voor predikanten', *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, 22 April 1971.

6 James Chappel, 'Nihilism and the Cold War: The Catholic Reception of Nihilism between Nietzsche and Adenauer', *Rethinking History* 19, no. 1 (2015): 95; Nitzan Lebovic, 'Introduction: The History of Nihilism and the Limits of Political Critique', *Rethinking History* 19, no. 1 (2015): 3.

7 E.g., C. Offringa, 'Plaatsbepaling in de strijd', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 89, no. 1 (1974): 67–8.

8 Friedrich Jaeger and Jörn Rüsen, *Geschichte des Historismus: Eine Einführung* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1992), 1.

9 Frederick C. Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 6, 8.

10 Georg G. Iggers, 'Historicism: The History and Meaning of the Term', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56, no. 1 (1995): 129–52.

11 Reinhard Laube, *Karl Mannheim und die Krise des Historismus: Historismus als wissenssoziologischer Perspektivismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 87–197; *Krise des Historismus, Krise der Wirklichkeit: Wissenschaft, Kunst und Literatur 1880–1932*, ed. Otto Gerhard Oexle (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007). See also Annette Wittkau, *Historismus: Zur Geschichte des Begriffs und des Problems* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992).

12 Herman Paul, *Het moeras van de geschiedenis: Nederlandse debatten over historisme* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2012).

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