

Impact of Positivism, Industrial Revolution and Capitalism on European Historiography

The nineteenth century was the heyday of Scientific Revolution in Europe. It was characterized by tremendous development in natural sciences owing to many new discoveries. Natural Science as a branch of knowledge was greatly admired by the people as natural scientists were perceived to be rendering great services to humanity. The following were the major impacts of the Scientific Revolution, which consequently affected the discipline of history in particular, and the varied branches of knowledge in general during the nineteenth century;

- (i) The Scientific Revolution established the hegemony and domination of science over all other disciplines owing to its perceived usefulness
- (ii) The Scientific Method, based on empiricism or observation and experimentation, became popular, and many other disciplines and branches of knowledge started borrowing it.
- (iii) The Scientific Revolution resulted in the emergence of Positivism in the nineteenth century.

Positivism and the Hegemony of Scientific Knowledge

Positivism is a nineteenth-century intellectual movement, which is considered to be a byproduct of the Scientific Revolution. The proponents

of the movement argued that all true knowledge is Scientific, which is acquired through the application of scientific method based on empiricism or observation through sense perception (the use of five senses), experience and experimentation the scientific knowledge, also called positive knowledge, thus acquired 1s first hand and necessarily true. According to the positivist thinkers, the following were the characteristics of positive knowledge;

- (i) Positive knowledge is worldly, concerned with this world alone, and does not-deal with other-worldly phenomena
- (ii) It is secular knowledge, without any influence of religion.
- (iii) It is anti-theological and anti-metaphysical in nature.

The positivist thinkers rejected some disciplines such as metaphysics (a branch of philosophy dealing with speculation regarding 'the nature of Reality/ Being without concrete physical evidence), theology, and religious studies. To them, positivism was characterized by the application of the scientific methodology to acquire all forms of knowledge. They claimed that true knowledge can be gained only through science, i.e. through the application of Scientific method. During the eighteenth century, British thinkers Such as David Hume and George Berkeley stressed the role of sense-perception in the acquisition of knowledge. However, it was Auguste Comte who Systematized positivism in the nineteenth-century.

Auguste Comte and Systematization of Positivism

Auguste Comte (b. 1798-d. 1857), a French philosopher, played a crucial role in systematization of positivism. His most important work is *The Positive Philosophy* (published in 1824). Comte is considered to be one of the founders of sociology. He also coined the term 'sociology for the science of human societies, and labeled it as the highest science and 'super-history', the history of a higher order or level. He argued that law, morality, politics and religion all were to be reconstituted on the new scientific basis. He himself became the prophet and the founder of a new religion, called the Religion of humanity and Reason, in which the object of worship was humanity. It did not become very popular, and was short-lived.

He periodized the intellectual development of humanity in three stages during which human thought emerged from mystery, and acquired knowledge .resulting in the total control of reality through total control over society;

- (i) the primitive theological stage (until 1300 AD) during which the causation for natural and social events was sought in supernatural factors,
- (ii) The transient metaphysical stage (1300-1800) was a transitional period between the theological and positivistic age; and

(iii) the final positivistic stage (from 1800 onwards) in which people started believing in science. The third is the last and the final stage of human history. Critics have pointed out that Comet's theory about the intellectual development of humanity is Euro-centric, as it takes into account only European experiences but claim universal validity.

Ranke; the Father of Modern Objective Historiography

Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) was a nineteenth-century German historian, who was Professor of history at the University of Berlin, Germany. He wrote the histories of Germany, France, Greece, Rome, and Southern Europe, etc. He is considered to be the father of the school of modern objective-historiography. He urged the use of scientific method in historical research and emphasized the importance of using primary or contemporary sources for it. He insisted on including references, notes, and bibliography in works of history, so that the reader may know the sources consulted by a historian for his research. Moreover, he criticized the historian's approach of viewing history of the past in the light of the present, and argued that past should be studied on its own terms. He also asserted the importance of historical criticism, especially the critical study of authorship, including the disposition and orientation of a historian, his affiliations, scholarship and comparison with other contemporary historians.

Lord Acton's Views about History

Baron John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton (1834-1902), better known as Lord Acton, was a famous English historian, who taught at the University of Cambridge, England. He is considered to be the real founder of the Cambridge school of history. He challenged the conventional approaches to history, and believed that in his contemporary times, the Writing of an 'ultimate history', as believed by many, was impossible. He was critical of the historians' over-emphasis on historical facts, and therefore, challenged the factual conception of history. He laid much emphasis on the importance of research methodology, as he asserted that it is the method, rather than the scholarship, that makes the historian. He saw a didactic purpose in historiography, and maintained that history of the past can teach virtue and uprightness, and serve as a guide to life. To him, a historian is a guardian of morality, in which lies the real utility of history.