

The Influence of Positivism on Historiography

In nineteenth century, the positivist movement greatly influenced historical thought and historiography. In particular, the views of Comte significantly impacted upon the ideas about history and history-Writing. The following are the impacts of positivism on historiography in Europe:

Rejection of Metaphysical and Speculative Explanations

As a result of positivism, all metaphysical and speculative -explanations for the causes of historical events, which could not be proved empirically, were excluded from the interpretation of history. The contemporary historiography is by and large positivistic, in which metaphysical explanations for historical events have no place. The role of God or divine factors has altogether been excluded from historical interpretation.

Rejection of Universal History

The idea of universal history beginning from the creation of human beings and universe and coming down to the end of time was rejected, as it involved considerable speculation and guesses work, and involved metaphysical explanations.

Stress on Accuracy of Historical Facts

The positivist historiographers stressed the recording of accurate historical facts having concrete, physical, objective and scientific evidence. Therefore, the importance of epigraphy (the study of inscriptions) and archaeology for historical research was stressed, which led to further developments-in these sub-fields of history. In fact, both epigraphy and archaeology-involve observation, and offer concrete historical evidence.

Emphasis on the Discovery of Laws

The positivist thinkers stressed the discovery of laws that govern natural and social phenomena, including the laws that govern historical developments. Comte himself contributed to the discovery of laws that governed the intellectual development-of humanity. Later, Karl Marx, Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee made attempts to explore the laws governing the entire human history, which are discussed in ensuing units.

Application of Scientific Methodology for Historical Research

The positivist thinkers believed in applying the method of the natural sciences to almost all the branches of knowledge, particularly the social Sciences. Natural sciences begin by ascertaining and determining facts, and then discover their causal connection. Comte, sociology (a social Science) begins with ascertaining facts about human life and society, and

then makes an attempt to explore the causal connections between the facts. The positivist thinkers also urged for the application of scientific method for historical research as well.

Stress on the Objectivity of historical Accounts

The positivist thinkers and historians stressed that the historians must be objective, and they should try to eliminate subjectivity in their historical research. They should not pass judgment on the past events in the light of their own values and beliefs. To them, the task of a historian is to narrate past events as they were, and not as they should have been.

A Critique to Positivist Approach to Historiography

The critics of positivism argue that scientific knowledge has its own limitations. It cannot give answers to questions relating to religion, metaphysics, God or Supreme Being, human existence (also called existential questions, such as why have human beings been created? what is the purpose of life? What is the destiny of human beings? What is the place of human beings in the universe, and their relationship with God or Reality?) The critics of positivism also assert that science cannot be a substitute for religion, since the sphere of science and the role of religion in life are quite different.

The critics of positivist approach to historiography assert that the use of scientific method for historical research does not guarantee a satisfactory interpretation of historical events. Scientists try to explore the natural laws (the laws governing nature), but the task of historians is somewhat different. Historians have to ascertain historical facts before. They try to explore the laws governing Society and history. In fact, the analogy between natural facts and historical facts is misleading and erroneous. The critics of positivist approach to historiography also maintain that the positivist's insistence on complete objectivity was difficult to be attained, and moreover, In some cases, value-judgments on historical events by historians help compare, contrast and understand certain phenomena.

Industrial Revolution and Capitalism in Europe and their Impacts

The nineteenth-century Europe was marked by rapid transformation in economic, social, political and technological spheres which brought about the Industrial Revolution, and capitalism as an economic and social system. This transformation was much more advanced in England, which was the hub of Industrial Revolution in Europe. Moreover, capitalist economic practices were gradually institutionalized in England, where trade and industry were privately controlled for the purpose of generating profit. Capitalism gradually spread throughout Europe, and during the nineteenth

century, it became one of the major reasons for industrialization which requires capital investment.

As a result of industrialization, the handicraft system and small-scale cottage industries were wiped out, and replaced by large factories, where hundreds of workers were employed. The impacts of industrialization on politics, economy and society were tremendous and far-reaching which are as follows:- (i) A large number of people migrated from rural to urban areas for job opportunities in big cities. Moreover, the farmers were displaced due to modern methods of farming and agriculture. (ii) As a result of migration of people from rural to urban areas, urbanization took place, and large urban centers with huge population began to emerge. (iii) Due to discoveries in the field of medicine, rate of mortality was declined. Moreover, in the nineteenth century there were no large scale wars and casualties, which resulted in tremendous increase in human population leading to population explosion. During the span of one century, from 1815 to 1914 i.e. before the outbreak of the First World War, the population of Europe more than doubled, (iv) With increase in population, there were less job opportunities, which led to mass unemployment. Moreover, machines replaced industrial workers in factories, which further increased unemployment, and created economic unrest and social discontent. For instance, during the Luddite Riots in England (1811-12) handloom

weavers attacked and damaged the mechanized looms, as these machines had deprived them of their jobs. These machines were dubbed as mechanical monsters by the protestors. (v) However, the most important effect of industrialization was the emergence of a new class of people the proletariat or the industrial workers. This largest class of society was comprised of the poor, since their wages were very low. They worked in quite miserable conditions, and in many cases subjected to 12 to 16 hours work per day. Legally, they had no right to go to strike or demand anything from their employers. There emerged varied responses to the above-mentioned problems. As a result of legal intervention, new labor laws were enacted and the existing ones were improved. Some thinkers challenged the very basic assumptions of capitalism, and introduced new ideologies for creating better world. Some of the philosophers propounded utopian philosophies of ideal social conditions. The philosophy of Karl Marx was also a reaction to the problems and miseries created by the excesses of industrialization and capitalism.