



Friedrich Meinecke. *Die Entstehung des Historismus*. Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1936. lxi + 524 pp. Out of Print (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7100-7045-6.

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Meinecke and German Historiography

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The German historian Ludwig Dehio noted that historiography played an unusually important role in the formation of national identity in central Europe, especially Germany.[1] So it is not inappropriate that the last great product of the nineteenth-century German historiographic tradition, Friedrich Meinecke, should attempt to examine its origins. The fruit of his endeavor is *Die Entstehung des Historismus* (mistranslated as *Historism*, instead of *Historicism*). Meinecke notes in the opening remarks that the work is in part a corrective to the negative connotations the term has acquired at the expense of the intellectual achievements of historicism.[2]

Historism is also the last of the great trilogy, along with *Cosmopolitanism and the National State* (*Weltbuergertum und Nationalstaat*, 1907) and *Machiavellism* (*Die Idee der Staatsraeson in der neuen Geschichte*, 1924), that define Meinecke's legacy as the foremost intellectual historian in Germany during the first half of the twentieth century. *Historism* is a continuation of a project that was carried forth in the previous two books. *Weltbuergertum* examines two phenomena: the origins of nationalism and German unification under Bismarck's guidance, and *Die Idee der Staatsraeson* follows the second phenomenon, German unification, through a discussion of the origin of "raison d'etat" and Realpolitik in modern history. *Historism* pursues parts of the first strand, the origins of nationalism, by exploring in late eighteenth and early

nineteenth century thought what Meinecke calls a revolutionary new view of history, which fundamentally altered man's relationship to and understanding of history. The result was "the application of the life-governing principles achieved by the great German movement extending from Leibniz to the death of Goethe." [3] Meinecke traced the origins of historicism to the breaking down of thought processes attached to the concept of Natural Law.

In a classic example of the genetic approach to the history of ideas, *Historism* delineates the break down, or more precisely the breakthrough of what Meinecke considers the constraints on historical thought since its beginning. Meinecke confesses that his approach to the subject matter forces him to take an aerial view of the subject, one that permits him to traverse only selected mountaintops. However, he hopes that his endeavors will allow the readers to get a glimpse of the other peaks as well as some of the valleys.[4] Meinecke is far too modest in his assessment. Even if one disagrees with his conclusions, credit must be given to the level of thought and analysis that he has provided.

For Meinecke, the key to the revolution in thought lies in the blending of two ideas – the importance of the individual and the notion of development, which combined were able to break the stranglehold that Natural

Law had on historical thinking. Natural Law failed to take into account the importance of the individual. In spite of the Enlightenment's claim to champion the individual and individual rights, Meinecke maintained that the weakness in Enlightenment philosophy rested on a static conception of the individual. In Enlightenment thinking, the notion of man is generalized insofar as it conceives of man as having one unalterable essence that is valid for all places and all epochs. The faculty of reason is set above everything else, and non-rational elements of human nature were to be either discounted or overcome. This view of the individual is mirrored in the view of history. Whether it was the Enlightenment (or later Positivistic) view of history as progress, or the teleology that accompanied eschatological views, history was judged according to a transcendent law by which all epochs were equally measured. Natural Law and the Enlightenment ignored a crucial part of human nature, the irrational, and thus eliminated the role of chance from history.

Historicism attempts to correct the error and come to a more complete view of humanity, and history. Meinecke begins with an examination of the "Forerunners" to historicism: Shaftsbury, Leibniz, Gottfried Arnold, Vico and Latifau. The French contribution to this intellectual revolution highlighted by Voltaire and Montesquieu is examined next, followed by historical thought in the English Enlightenment (Hume, Gibbon, Robertson) and the English pre-Romantics. In the second half of the work Meinecke explores the contributions of those he considers to be the founders of the movement, Justus Moeser, Johann Gottfried Herder, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

Through a careful blending of the notion of the individual and of development, historicism breaks through the constraints of Enlightenment thought. The new notion of the individual is summed up in the following conclusion, which Meinecke attributed to Herder: "Individuum est ineffabile."^[5] Every individual, regardless of time, place, or station, possessed within himself a special quality which made him unique. What that quality was and how it would be used, or even its discovery by the individual was dependent upon the individual and the peculiar circumstances surrounding that person's life. This leads to the second key idea – development. In order to understand an individual, one must try to put oneself in his place, as much as possible. Thus, judgments about individuals could not be made based on some transcendent universal scale. They had to come from within the individual's particular historical circumstances and consider the options realistically available. Human behavior

and conduct must be judged according to a developmental scale, and not according to some abstract standard. The English pre-Romantic appreciation of Nature, which also marks the thought of Herder and Goethe, played an important role in the development of this notion. The diversity and oneness of Nature is a natural metaphor for variety and unity of human history.

In the realm of history Meinecke applies these two notions to both halves of the nation-state formula. Both the people of the nation and the state itself must be considered as individual entities with certain characteristics (or seeds) that they have been given, and judged according to their development within historical circumstances. Meinecke attempts to avoid historical relativism by claiming that each state and people are immediate to the divine. Within this framework, the state takes on a life of its own. It is an organism that must fight to survive among other state-organisms. The role of the state in nineteenth-century German historiography has been well documented.^[6] Firmly within this tradition, Meinecke admires the state, and his conviction of its importance in history permeate the work. He adheres to the Rankean tradition of advocating the primacy of foreign policy. Meinecke praises Moeser's pragmatism, which he attributes to his professional office. He also gently chastises Herder and Goethe for their lack of appreciation for the importance of the state.

Meinecke's disapproval of Herder's and Goethe's attitude toward the state reflects both the major strength and weakness of his work. The strength lies in Meinecke's ability to see the frontiers of innovation in the thought of individuals. He scrupulously fleshes out their new ideas, but also clearly demarcates the limitations of the new ideas and how old intellectual constraints prevented the individuals from taking the next logical step (in Meinecke's view) in their thought processes. The weakness lies in the author's inability to question the importance of the state in history. For Meinecke, and many other nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German historians, that state was the highest human achievement.

The importance of the state and its superiority over individuals were considered obvious and self-evident. The standard interpretation of Meinecke holds that World War I caused him to reduce the importance of power politics.^[7] Nevertheless, the importance of the state is still evident in Meinecke's work and he never renounces the proposition that the state has a different ethical standard than the individual. When combined with the tendency to view the state as an organism, it is difficult to see how

Meinecke could have renounced the state's use of power. This is all the more disconcerting when the reader realizes that Meinecke is spurred on in part by the Nazi seizure of power.[8] For all of Meinecke's efforts to recall a better time for German culture, he is unable to realize that the cultural tradition he venerates also contributes to the movement with which he was so ill at ease.

Notes:

[1]. Ludwig Dehio, "Ranke and German Imperialism," in *Germany and World Politics in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Dieter Pevsner, (New York, 1954), 38.

[2]. For a history of the term, Meinecke points the reader to Karl Heussi's *Die Krisis des Historismus* (1932). See Friedrich Meinecke, *Historism. The Rise of a New Historical Outlook*, trans. J.E. Anderson. (Routledge, 1972), liv.

[3]. Ibid. lv.

[4]. Ibid. lviii.

[5]. Ibid. 334. The same quote also adorns the title page of the original edition: "habe ich Dir das Wort Individuum est ineffabile woraus ich eine Welt ableite, schon geschrieben?" Goethe to Lavater 1780. "Have I not already written to you, 'Individuum est ineffabile', from which I derive a whole world?"

[6]. See Georg Iggers, *The German Conception of History. The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Wesleyan, 1983 revised edition) and Thomas Kornblicher, *Deutsche Geschichtsschreibung im 19. Jahrhundert*. (Pfaffenweilen, 1984).

[7]. See Robert Pois, *Friedrich Meinecke and German Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, 1972) and Georg Iggers, *The German Conception of History. The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Wesleyan, 1983 revised edition) Chapter VII.

[8]. Iggers, 218.

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