

# APPROACHING THE QUESTION OF FACTS IN HISTORY

IHS: History

Lecture I

# WHY WE STUDY HISTORY?

- The past teaches us about the present
- It builds empathy
- It can be intensely personal
- It can feel like completing a puzzle or solving a mystery
- Everything has a history!

# THE QUEST OF HISTORIANS: WHAT HAPPENED IN THE PAST?

- Is there such a thing as historical truth?
- How can we get to it?
- Would a time machine help?
- Would a video recording help?

# POSITIVIST VIEW OF HISTORY

Derived from three traditions:

- 1) August Comte's positivist philosophy
- 2) The British empiricist tradition
- 3) The Rankian tradition

Together they form E.H. Carr's 'Common Sense View of History'

# AUGUST COMTE AND POSITIVIST PHILOSOPHY

- Laced by a universalism espoused by the Enlightenment tradition
- Advocated the formulation of universal laws
- Three stages through which all human knowledge progressively passes:
  - 1) The theological or the fictitious
  - 2) Metaphysical or abstract
  - 3) Scientific or positive (the age of science and knowledge)
- Knowledge is generated through observation and experience
- Not interested in individual facts but in general laws
- These general laws can be derived through the method of induction

# THE EMPIRICIST TRADITION

- Knowledge is based on experience
- The primacy of senses as the source of knowledge
- Only legitimate form of knowledge is that whose truth can be verified
- Discounts knowledge based on tradition, belief, abstraction or imagination

# THE RANKIAN TRADITION

- Leopold von Ranke: Credited with the beginning of modern historiography
- The past should be understood/studied in isolation from the present
- The historian should write about the past based on 'sources'
- But not all sources are equal
- Emphasis on providing references
- The primacy of facts

# THE HISTORICAL POSITIVISM OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

- The Rankian call: *wie es eigentlich gewesen*
- Claiming history as a science
- Aligned with the British empiricist tradition
- Facts are like sense-impressions
- Their reception is a passive act
- A common-sense view of history



## WHAT IS A HISTORICAL FACT?

- Are all facts about the past of relevance to the historian?
- Certain basic facts form the backbone of history
- Not the ones with which the historian is primarily concerned
- Who decides what is a basic fact of history?
- Can a fact from the past be promoted to a fact of history?

# HISTORIANS OF THE ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL WORLDS

- What survives across generations to become the facts of Antiquity?
- The preservation of the past is a selective process
- What we know of 5th century BCE Greece is a picture formed by a small group of people
- Why do we know that medieval world was deeply religious?

# THE PLIGHT OF THE MODERN HISTORIAN

- The more recent past is more knowable
- Has a dual task
  - 1) Of discovering few significant facts and turning them into the facts of history
  - 2) Of discarding many 'insignificant' facts as unhistorical
- Fetishism of facts based on a fetishism of documents
- Do they reveal an absolute truth?

## THREE THINGS ABOUT FACTS AND HISTORY

- There exist no pure facts
- The historian needs to have some imaginative understanding of the minds of their subject
- The historian is of their own age