



K O N I N K L I J K E N E D E R L A N D S E
A K A D E M I E V A N W E T E N S C H A P P E N

Historicism as a Polemical Concept in the Humanities and Social Sciences, 1890-1980

Although “historicism” is a many-headed monster, notorious for being defined in different ways by different groups of scholars, there seems to be consensus at least on *Historismus* being a nineteenth-century phenomenon. Whether historicism is defined as the scholarly paradigm represented by Leopold von Ranke, as a worldview propagated by counter-Enlightenment intellectuals such as Johann Gottfried von Herder, as “neo-styles” in art and architecture, or as a perspectival theory of knowledge, its key representatives all belonged to “the long nineteenth century” (1789-1914). Judging by the secondary literature, then, “historicism” is a label for nineteenth-century modes of thought, which in the early decades of the twentieth century made way for a variety of “modernist” approaches in history, philosophy, art, and architecture.

How convincing is this consensus? If we treat historicism not as a descriptive label, but as an actors’ category used by historical agents themselves, it quickly turns out that “historicism” is a term of late nineteenth-century origin, that it was used most frequently in the early and mid-twentieth centuries, and, most importantly, that “historicism” was more a polemical term than a descriptive label. When twentieth-century scholars, artists, or intellectuals warned against “historicism,” they didn’t criticize a nineteenth-century school, but drew attention to what they perceived as dangerous implications of a then-current way of thinking, feeling, or behaving vis-à-vis history. For them, “historicism” typically was a word of warning, sometimes even a term of abuse, the rhetorical, emotional, and political aspects of which were as important as their referential function.

Examples not only include Karl Popper, whose famous diatribe against “historicism” tried to exorcise the spirit of Hegel and Marx, but also a range of well and lesser known sociologists, economists, political theorists, historians, theologians, and philosophers, who feared that something essential was undervalued or ignored by the method, paradigm, or worldview they called “historicism.” Often the phrase did not refer to the past *per se*, but to a bleak future perceived to be looming when historically informed performances of Baroque music, contextual treatments of philosophical disputes, or historical critical readings of sacred scriptures were to gain dominance.

What happens when “historicism” is studied as an emotionally charged *Kampfbegriff*, employed by a variety of authors in and outside the humanities and social sciences from roughly the 1890s until late into the twentieth century? Apart from challenging the

conventional wisdom that historicism was a nineteenth-century phenomenon, this approach seems to have four potential advantages, which are briefly alluded to in our subtitle:

- 1) Perceptions: In the best tradition of the history of concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*), it stimulates historians to be attentive to distinct and changing usages of the term. What did “historicism” mean to specific authors in specific temporal, geographical, and disciplinary contexts?
- 2) Beliefs: It encourages historians to interpret the perceived dangers of “historicism” as indices of preciously held beliefs about history, the past, or past-present relations. What “relations to the past” or regimes of historicity did critics of “historicism” try to defend?
- 3) Emotions: Drawing on an emotional turn in cultural and intellectual history, it invites historians to examine the anxiety, anger, and worry behind criticism of “historicism.” Why was the tone of the polemics often accusing or complaining and what does this convey about the critics’ concerns?
- 4) Transfers: It challenges historians not to study isolated case studies, but to examine the spread and transfer of language of “historicism” across linguistic and disciplinary boundaries. Is it true that musicologists borrowed the phrase from art historians, to what extent did architectural concerns resemble the worries of theologians and philosophers, and if “historicism” wasn’t as prominent a term in France as it was in Germany and England, was there an equivalent concept in French?

These are central questions for a two-day workshop scheduled to take place on August 30-31, 2018, in the seventeenth-century Trippen House in Amsterdam that serves as the seat of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW).

In addition to keynote lectures by Garry Dorrien (Columbia University / Union Theological Seminary), David N. Myers (Center for Jewish History, New York / University of California Los Angeles), and George Steinmetz (University of Michigan), the organizers are soliciting proposals for 20-minute papers addressing one or more of the questions listed above. Abstracts of 200-300 words are due by February 1, 2018, and can be sent to Adriaan van Veldhuizen at a.p.van.veldhuizen@hum.leidenuniv.nl.

The workshop is organized by Herman Paul and Adriaan van Veldhuizen (Leiden University) in the context of a project entitled “The Demands of Our Time,” funding for which is provided by the Thorbecke Fund (KNAW). For more information, please contact Adriaan van Veldhuizen at a.p.van.veldhuizen@hum.leidenuniv.nl.