

Historism: A Humanistic Approach to History

by
Lloyd Sorenson
University of Oregon

Historism offers a humanistic antidote to the scientism that infects so much of contemporary historical theory. An outgrowth of the philosophical idealism of the Age of Goethe, historism found early explicit formulation in a paper by Wilhelm von Humboldt, "On the Historian's Task" (1821). Here historism's idealist origin is obvious in Humboldt's affirmation of ideas that are held to inform developments in the historical world and to constitute in them a spontaneous "inner causal nexus" never found in the world of nature. Still Humboldt points beyond idealism by associating these ideas always with historical individualities like nations. It is the historian's task to "divine" historical ideas in their struggle for self-realization: they can never be directly perceived or apprehended in an unambiguous concept. Thus, the historian's mode of understanding becomes radically different from that in the natural sciences. Leopold von Ranke, the greatest German historian of the nineteenth century, also speaks, in his theoretical musings, of the historian's divining historical ideas. Much more emphatically than Humboldt, however, Ranke affirms the individuality of all historical phenomena and thus makes fully explicit what Friederick Meinecke would later consider the defining characteristic of historism. Both Humboldt and Ranke sensed something in the historian's mode of understanding that differentiated it from explanation in the natural sciences. Wilhelm Dilthey, the most perspicacious historical theorist of the nineteenth century, raised their vague sense of difference, which led both to speak of an historian's "divining" historical ideas, to full clarity in his theory of *Verstehen* and purged their historical theory of much of its idealist residue: the historian can understand the individualities of the human world because he is himself human. In *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, Frederick Meinecke defined historism in its fully emerged form and traced its origins in European thought from Shaftesbury to Goethe. The essence of the development, which he held to be "one of the greatest intellectual revolutions" in Western thought, was "the substitution of a process of *individualizing* observation for a *generalizing* view of human forces in history."

Sport historians might well resist the temptation they sometimes feel to subordinate their efforts to the generalizing social sciences. Let the history of sport be understood, in the humanistic sense of *Verstehen*, as a developing historical individuality, as the magnificent on-going human achievement it actually was and is.



Lloyd Sorenson's Address