

## MODERN HISTORY

Compare and contrast the purposes, perspectives & methodologies of Gibbon and von Ranke.

In your answer make a judgement as to the relative strengths and weaknesses of these approaches to history.

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Edward Gibbon and Leopold von Ranke – two vastly different historians – have assisted in shaping the development of historical writing in relation to the contrasting perspectives, purposes and methodologies of each. Whilst Gibbon wrote predominantly to engage his reader, von Ranke valued objectivity and the use of primary sources above all else; both a product of their times, each provides a reflection of – consciously or unconsciously – particular aspects of their contemporary society. This manifests itself in Gibbon’s work through his expression of the Enlightenment thinking, and his secular approach to history; comparatively, von Ranke illustrates the attitudes of the aristocracy, the sole writers of the sources to which he referred. It is through an in-depth analysis of the perspectives, purposes and methodologies of each historian that an effective consideration into the strengths and weaknesses of each may be conducted, and an assessment made as to their relative contributions to historiography.

Edward Gibbon was an English historian writing in a time of major political and intellectual change; his lifetime saw the beginnings of the French Revolution and rise of the Enlightenment and the *philosophes*. This accompanied an era in which people were investigating new ideas and questioning the old; now reason and logic were used in order to broach moral, political, religious and social issues. The Enlightenment allowed Europe to move away from some key characteristics of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, especially that of the violent wars of religion and the political, social and spiritual domination of the church. This made way for the *philosophes* – who blamed the Catholic Church and organised religion for ‘holding back their intellectual development’ – and created the generally anti-religious environment to which Gibbon was exposed. This secular approach, to history especially, greatly affected Gibbon’s historical works, alongside the general assumption of the *philosophes* that human nature was constant through time; this ensured Gibbon’s willingness to judge the history about which he wrote. In one of his major works, The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, his perspective is apparent in the way that he reflects the impact of Enlightenment thinking. This is illustrated by his allocation of blame for the fall of the Roman Empire upon the intolerance and internal division within the rise of Christianity. Thus Gibbon’s perspective is a clear reflection of a number of ideals embodied by Enlightenment thinking and the *philosophes*, including a rejection of organised religion and the belief that human behaviour is unchanging through time.

A close examination of the intended purpose of Gibbon’s work is also able to provide an effective insight into the mind of the historian; it is just as important to note that whilst Gibbon in many ways conformed to the Enlightenment ways of thinking, he strongly rejected the ‘unrestrained philosophic theorising’ of many of the *philosophes*, criticising the writings of historians which were not derived from fact. Nor was Gibbon’s purpose didactic, in the style of classical historians, instead aiming to reflect his personal and philosophical beliefs; this is manifested through a contempt for organised religion and his partiality towards a mixed constitution. He intended, first and foremost, to enter into a dialogue with his readers, in order to challenge, provoke and engage them to apply their own intelligence to the information presented, inviting them to enter into the mind of the historian. J. Warren wrote that Gibbon aimed to “encourage [his readers] to consider his views on the nature of civilisation and how it could and should progress”. However, Gibbon also valued his search for factual accuracy, often showing a disapproval of histories written by *philosophes* with no factual basis. Hence, Gibbon’s purpose was twofold, seeking to both engage the reader and present a factual historical account; he was “as proud of elegant writing as historical scholarship”.

Gibbon's methodologies centred largely around his meticulous research and his search for factual accuracy; his approach to writing reflected both the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment atmosphere of the *philosophes*, and the legacy of the 17<sup>th</sup> century erudite, whose works tended to be massively detailed and factual. This was partly in response to the common over-generalised interpretations which accompanied the theorising of the *philosophes*; however Gibbon also rejected the erudite custom of gathering vast amounts of facts with no useful purpose. By directly addressing the reader, and creating a dialogue, Gibbon was able to engage the audience and invite them to consider the workings of his mind, challenging them to make an educated judgement. Gibbon also employed the use of irony in order to highlight certain truths, using it, for example, to highlight especially fanatical and ludicrous behaviour; this literary technique assists in drawing the reader into the story. Gibbon's biased perspective (in favour of Enlightenment thinking) was to also affect his methodologies, showing an obvious contempt for Christianity and those holding positions within the church, including priests, monks and theologians. It is in this way that Gibbon's methodologies were shaped by the context of his time, alongside a set of unique beliefs which succeeded in distinguishing him from his fellow Enlightenment thinkers.

Perhaps unfortunately, Gibbon did not make an impact upon the historiographical writings to follow him; his unique and individual style of writing ensured that his works remained free of the possible distortions – in order to serve their own personal interests – of later historians. The factual accuracy of Gibbon was often lost upon his fellow Enlightenment writers, despite the strength of this approach; even today, Gibbon is recognised for the meticulous detail of his research, allowing him to explore beyond just the features and stories surrounding an historical event. He was also able to present the reader with a range of options in the interpretation of an event, in the hopes of stimulating intellectual thought and engaging with the audience. This, however, meant that Gibbon's opinion was often evident – demonstrating an historical bias – and saw the use of a number of stylistic devices, including irony and suspense. It would be anachronistic to judge the approach with which Gibbon presented his work by modern standards; despite this, Gibbon's decision to present his histories without an attempt at objectivity meant that his works were heavily influenced by the Enlightenment theories. The belief that human behaviour remained constant through time meant that Gibbon felt himself able to judge the history of the past, imposing the ideas and values of his own age upon the previous. His contempt of the Church and organised religion also assists in distorting the presentation of his information, and in the face of modern standards renders him a biased – and thus possible unreliable – source. Nevertheless, Gibbon's work remains an important part of an ongoing investigation into the past, and provides an accurate reflection into the life and mind of the Enlightenment thinkers of his time.

However, it was this failure of Gibbon to seek objectivity in his work that allowed for him to be soon after superseded by the rise of Leopold von Ranke, the first objectivist historian. A German historian of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, von Ranke was labelled the “father of modern objective history”, and credited with turning the writing of history into a ‘professional occupation’. His deeply-rooted Lutheran beliefs were later to impact upon his approach to history, regarding it as the result of divine will; despite an acceptance that it was not appropriate or possible for the historian to reveal God's purpose, von Ranke believed that it the influence of God was reflected clearly in history. This is a clear contrast to that of Gibbon, who expressly condemned the Church, adopting the thinking of the Enlightenment in his histories. The times in which he lived were also to affect his writings, which reflected both a nationalistic and conservative outlook. An era of German nationalism – as a result of both opposition to the expansion of France and the unification of the German nation – meant that von Ranke's work strongly reflected a revulsion for the French Revolution, and a rejection of the Enlightenment thinking. His views also tended to favour political power as a key factor in history, with focus directed often towards the actions of kings and political leaders; this illustrates a similarity between von Ranke and Gibbon, in that Gibbon addressed predominantly political subjects in his writings. It was a combination of this intended objective approach, and the influences to which von Ranke was exposed, and reflected in his works, that assisted in shaping his perspective.

Leopold von Ranke has often been praised for his approach to the writings of history, aspiring to establish the writing of history on the basis of facts and the use of primary sources. He claimed that his purpose lay in instructing the present for the benefit of future ages, and reconstruct the uniqueness of periods of the past. He aimed to present his information “wie es eigentlich gewesen” – how it essentially was, and avoid the anachronistic approach of judging past. His prime objective, and claim throughout his career, was that he tried to write his histories without prevailing theories, prejudice, and bias, making use of the availability of sources in order to create a factual basis for his work. It is in this way that von Ranke’s purpose differs from that of Gibbon, who aimed primarily to engage his readers; conversely von Ranke strived predominantly for objectivity and factual accuracy.

It was Leopold von Ranke who was to set the standard for future historians, commonly attributed with the creation of the ‘science of history’, and the professionalization of the study of history. It was his unique methodologies which enabled him to effectively break away from the writings of the Enlightenment *philosophes*, utilising a technique of meticulous gathering and analysis of sources. His mistrust for history textbooks ensured that he studied – where available – the original documents, which allowed him to draw his own conclusions directly from the sources and supposedly present his historical research free of bias. His search for eye-witness accounts, alongside his use of primary sources with “scientific objectivity” reflected his methodologies in an attempt to liberate his writings from bias and prejudice. However, von Ranke’s methodology does not solely revolve around a strict presentation of factual evidence, encompassing purely literary elements in his work – such as speed, freshness of diction and fantastic control – in order to make his work more readable. The empiricist element of von Ranke’s historical accounts meant that his works were based not on theory but on observations and evidence; he often chose to use sources in order to prove attitudes and feelings, as well as facts. His methodology demonstrated impartiality in his ability to allow the facts to emerge from the sources, rather than present his opinion to the reader. This is in stark contrast to the writings of Gibbon, who did not seek to write objectively, and offered his reader a number of options to consider in their interpretation of the event. Therefore it was von Ranke’s methodology, and his attention to factual and source-based detail, which established him as the pioneer of professional and objective history.

Leopold von Ranke’s approach to history was an important one, which allowed for him to have an impact upon both the craft of the historian, and upon ideas of how history should be written; in helping to shape subsequent historiography, von Ranke was also able to effectively end Enlightenment historiography. His method is, to this day, widely appreciated as the contributing factor towards the professionalization of history; his thorough attention to sources and facts meant that he pioneered an objective, empiricist style of writing on par with the standards by which historical accounts are judged today. His stylistic devices also allow for his works to be more easily read, and often less prone to omission and inaccuracies; however his works have often been criticised for his common use of sources written by the rich and powerful. The ensuing in-built bias thus detracts from the objectiveness of his work – despite his intention – and acts as a reflection of the attitudes of the aristocracies of the time. Towards the end of his writing career he also sought to write a world history; however, he was unable to escape the bias which meant that he became a product of his times, his personal situation and his own personal and political prejudices. This is reflected in his nationalistic outlook, his rejection of the Enlightenment thinking and the religious beliefs implicit in his works. However, despite this, von Ranke paved the way for future historians, and it would be – as in the case of Gibbon – anachronistic to judge based on criticisms of factual inaccuracy. Von Ranke set the standard of future historiography, ensuring the use of primary sources became inseparable from the writings of history and objectivity came to be valued as a characteristic of historical works.

It is clear that both Edward Gibbon and Leopold von Ranke represent two blatantly contrasting approaches to the writing of history; both are important figures in a study of the development of history writing as it is known today. Whilst Gibbon failed to seek objectivity in his works, von Ranke prided himself on a lack of bias and preconceived thinking, aiming predominantly to achieve

scientific objectivity. Proud of his elegant writing – including techniques such as irony and suspense – as well as his historical accuracy, Gibbon’s purpose was different in that he aimed prevalently to engage and challenge his readers. It was von Ranke who was able to “professionalise” historical writing, turning to sources and scientific research on which to base his works, claiming to write free of bias. Gibbon, on the other hand, offered his reader a number of options by which to interpret a single event, and making evident his own opinion. An example of this is the evidence of Enlightenment thinking in his works, particularly in his contempt for Christianity and the Church. Von Ranke instead rejected this Enlightenment thinking, and illustrated his deeply religious stance through his regard of histories as a result of divine will. However, it has been said that Gibbon’s factual accuracy superseded that of von Ranke, who chose his subject matter in order to reveal the influence of God. Despite this, Ranke was shown to have developed a more sophisticated historical technique, valuing the use of original documents. Therefore it is evident that, in spite of major differences between the writings of Gibbon and von Ranke, both have had an important impact upon the way that history is approached by future historians, and have helped to shape the way in which history writing has developed through the ages.