Historicism: What It Is, and What It Means for Consumer Research

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Abstract

Historicism is a major German philosophy of social science. Based upon an intense and all-pervading awareness of change over time, it challenges the logical positivist underpinnings of most current work in consumer behavior. It encourages an expanded research agenda which can confront the complex flux of consumption behavior.

Introduction

"Historicism is an intellectual force with which one must come to terms—whether one wants to or not" (Mannheim 1924, p. 1).

Historicism is a major philosophy of social science developed by a long line of German thinkers. Classically defined as a mode of analysis in which "all of our thought about man, his culture, and his values is fundamentally historically-oriented" (Troeltsch 1922, p. 102), it is characterized by an intense and all-pervading awareness of change over time. Though discussed at length in several social science and humanities literatures, it has been neglected in the marketing and consumer behavior literatures.

It is time to remedy this neglect. Historicism challenges several of the most fundamental environmental and epistemological assumptions of Logical Positivism/Empiricism—assumptions which underlie most of the work being done in our field. Such a challenge will stimulate re-evaluation of these assumptions and lead ultimately to stronger bases for investigation. Moreover, Historicism encourages as well as provides a strong theoretical rationale for, alternative forms of analysis. Some of these forms are already emerging, others have not been employed in consumer research. In particular, Historicism provides a sophisticated rationale for various forms of historical analysis. This paper will explicate this rationale by elucidating the core ideas of Historicism, contrasting and comparing them to the core ideas of Logical Positivism/Empiricism, and discussing their implications for consumer behavior research.

Essential Ideas of Historicism

The ideas discussed here represent the summing up of over a century of German Historicism in the work of the sociologist Mannheim (1926, 1960 [1936]), the historian Heinzeck (1972 [1936]), and the philosopher/theologian Troeltsch (1922, 1923). Tugger (1973) provides a lucid English-language introduction to these ideas. Historicism shares four basic characteristics with other German thought; these distinguish German from Anglo-American social science.

First, it has a strong historical-dynamic orientation—Marx's "dialectical materialism" and Schumpeter's "creative destruction" are well-known examples of such an orientation. Second, it is strongly sceptical that empirical analysis can be the ultimate test of truth. Third, it emphasises the innate structure of the mind, which structures empirical data according to its own dynamic, and which is thus far more important than the data in and of themselves. Fourth, it explicitly and emphatically rejects the belief that social science should emulate the methods and assumptions of the natural sciences.

The essential ideas of Historicism may be grouped in two sets, the first expressing the philosophy's basic assumptions and beliefs about the social environment (which includes culture, politics, and economic life), the second expressing the goals of Historicist social analysis. The two sets hang together closely.

Assumptions and Beliefs About the Social Environment

1. Change—complex flux—is the fundamental and all-pervading reality of social life. It suffuses thought as well as institutions and behavior. Social phenomena are viewed as being "always in flux, as phenomena (Potenzien) which are coming from somewhere in time and pressuring on towards somewhere in time" (Mannheim 1924, p. 2). Change is the dominant reality. Social analysis must confront it. It cannot be ignored, or over-simplified, or assumed away as it is typically done in Anglo-American social science (Fullerton forthcoming). The emphasis upon change is based upon considerable reflection about the undeniable changes which characterize social phenomena over historical time. Since flux is the normal state of affairs, the analytical construct of "equilibrium" is rejected as bizarre and erroneous nonsense.

2. While some social change is superficial and repetitive, a great deal of it is complex, unpredictable on the basis of past events, and fundamental. As Troeltsch expressed it (1923, pp. 13-14, underlines supplied):

History...is...an immeasurable, incomparable procession of always-new, unique, and hence individual tendencies, welling up from undiscovered depths, and coming to light in each case in unsuspected places and under different forms. Thus the universal law of history consists precisely in this, that the Divine Reason, or the Divine Life, within history, constantly manifests itself in always-new and always-peculiar individualisations—and hence its tendency is not towards unity or universality at all.

According to Historicism, therefore, even basic and long-standing behavior traits and institutions may change radically with time. The process is neither simple nor predictable—assumptions that change follows known and regular patterns are in error. Since behavior, motives, and institutions are neither constant nor universal, the laws and generalities which elucidate them cannot pretend to either constancy or universality.

3. Social phenomena should be seen as belonging to complex and time-bound systems to whose identity they simultaneously contribute and share. The unifying element of such a system is "a single central value, which unites with itself in a more or less clear and energetic manner all the other values" (Troeltsch 1923, p. 94). For example, the central value of the consumption system in advanced Western economies might be said to be "aggressive consumption" (McKendrick, Breuer, Plumb 1982, p. 316).

4. Social systems are "historical individuals" (historische Individuen. See Troeltsch 1922, pp. 119-120). The phrase "historical individual" means, first, that each system has its own unique identity—its individuality. Second, it means that this identity is a dynamic, ever-evolving one; it is "historical", in other words. As a social system evolves through time it picks up and is somewhat changed by some of the specific values, attitudes, and conditions which characterize the time periods through which it passes. The religious system of Christianity, for example, "presents no historical uniformity but displays a different character in each age" (Troeltsch 1923, p. 13). Its sole constant has been the abstract idea of "Christianity"; the specific values, beliefs, and institutions which flesh out the abstraction have and continue to change over time and across place. Economic systems—including consumption behavior—also reflect their times and change over time (Buecher 1967 [1901], p. 83).

The uniqueness, the individuality, of a system is both temporal and spatial according to Historicist philosophy. Consumption behavior in one nation at one time, for example, will very likely be different from that in another nation at the same time—or the same nation at an earlier or later time. It is becoming very evident that, according to Historicism, ...

4. Social science must reject the search for timeless universals—in the subject matter which it treats no such
things exist. "The essence of Historicism analysis," according to Meinecke (1972, p. 14), "is the substitution of a process of individualizing observation for a generalizing view of human forces." Meinecke believes that Historicism has liberated Western social analysis from the simplistic—and chimerical—search for "natural (i.e., universal) laws" applicable to all times and places. Thus liberating, social analysis can concentrate on probing individual systems and times in all their richness and complexity.

5. Bounded relativism must characterize social analysis. If there are no universals about social processes, then any generalizations must perform be relative. But the major Historicism thinkers explicitly reject a total, unbounded relativism, whose corrosive and nihilistic nature they deplore (Mannheim 1924; Troeltsch 1922, pp. 68, 108). They see very clearly that Historicism taken to extremes would deny the possibility of any theory or generalization: every phenomenon would be seen as unique at every moment. This extreme, however, is considered as bad as the belief in "natural laws".

Historicism's major advocates posit a bounded relativism. The most eloquent argument is Mannheim's (1924). He argues that absolutes do exist in social phenomena—but that they are absolute for a finite time or a specific place. "The Absolute is itself in a process of becoming; it is itself spatially bound... There are no formulations (Forderungen) which are valid for all times, but rather the Absolute reconstitutes itself in a new, concrete form in 1972" (Mannheim 1924, pp. 56, 58). "Thus the individualizing observation" which is to be the goal of Historicism analysis does not preclude generalizations, even law-like generalizations; it merely means that these are transient.

6. Social knowledge is ultimately non-cumulative. Obviously though unstated in the classical works of Historicism, this point has recently been made forcefully by the historical sociologist Bendix (1984, p. 9). Within an historical era and/or specific social system, research findings may not cumulate. The inevitability of fundamental change, however, means that after some time—or contemporaneously in another culture—they will no longer apply. Hence they are ultimately non-cumulative. Research findings in the natural sciences, on the other hand, can be cumulative.

Goals of Historicism Analysis

The goals of Historicism analysis flow logically from the philosophy's assumptions and beliefs about the social environment. There are three major goals:

1. Social science should focus its attention upon concrete social phenomena rather than upon the search for universals. By concrete social phenomena is meant phenomena which are temporally and spatially specific. 19th-Century Historicism usually treated the nation as the basic spatial unit. But there is no reason why other spatial demarcations such as regions or cities could not be employed. The basic temporal unit could be any time period.

2. Social science should strive to elucidate the ethos of social systems—their distinctive guiding principles and characteristics. In attempting such elucidation, the researcher has to keep in mind that systems are ever-evolving and that they are more than the sum of their component units. The whole and the parts of social systems exist in a dynamic relationship with one another; the distinctive overall ethos of each system is immanent in each of its components as well as the whole (Troeltsch 1922, pp. 69-73).

If analysis is successful, it will penetrate to and succeed in explaining "the innermost structure of this perpetual flux" which characterizes every social system (Mannheim 1924, p. 4). Often the "innermost structure" of a system will consist of a major cultural or other "motif"—"aggressive consumption" for example—whose process of development can be traced and under whose influence other compo-

ments of the system can be shown to have developed. The process of discovering a system's inner structure encourages a creative and disciplined critical approach. Such European-originated analytical tools as hermeneutics and semiotics are ideally suited to the task because they permit one to infer a great deal of meaning from discrete phenomena. Our new-conventional approaches, on the other hand, are subject to extreme constraint in interpretation (See Troeltsch 1922, p. 84). They would introduce difficulty in detecting the uniqueness which Historicism philosophy believes will mark the inner structure of each social system. Similarly, Historicism prefers verbal to mathematical representations, since the latter tend to blur unique characteristics and to imply greater similarity among phenomena than actually exist. One regression equation looks too much like every other.

3. Social science should strive to explain the process(es) of development and change in social systems. Since change is the core reality of all social phenomena, they cannot be understood in any meaningful way until the process by which they have developed—changed—over time is made clear. Analysis of a system at a single moment in time is by itself of slight value; analysis which ignores the development process is of even less value.

Much Historicism work envisions the development process as following one of three general models—the dialectical model, the organic model, or the teleological model. In the dialectical model a system is believed to evolve as opposed tendencies which emerge from an earlier system clash then form a new synthesis, which is the system. In time, however, the new synthesis will itself shatter into opposed tendencies. In the organic model, which was more popular in the 19th-Century than later, systems are envisioned as growing and eventually dying analogously to plants. In the teleological model change is seen as progress towards some fine and predetermined end. Of these models the dialectical is by far the most powerful and useful. It has been and continues to be employed to good effect by European social scientists.

The Contrast With Logical Positivism/Empiricism

Both the philosophical underpinnings and the research goals of Historicism are radically different from those of Logical Positivism/Empiricism. Historicism challenges such core tenets of Logical Positivism/Empiricism as: the possibility of universal laws and law-like generalizations; cumulative social knowledge; intersubjective certifiability and researcher objectivity; and empirical testing as decisive. The major differences between Historicism and Logical Positivism/Empiricism are explained in Table 1.

TABLE 1

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<th>MAJOR DIFFERENCES BETWEEN HISTORICISM AND LOGICAL POSITIVISM/EMPIRICISM</th>
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<tr>
<td>Historicism (Mannheim 1924; Meinecke 1972; Oxle 1984; Troeltsch 1922, 1923)</td>
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<td>Logical Positivism/Empiricism (Hunt 1983; Peter and Olson 1983)</td>
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1. All facets of the social environment are in constant and complex flux; hence, any generality or law about social phenomena is ultimately ephemeral. Underlying relationships among key variables are as unstable as the key variables themselves.

2. Social knowledge is ultimately non-cumulative since change will inevitably render earlier findings obsolete.

While flux is undeniable, eternal and universal realities do exist. These realities can be expressed as generalities and laws which apply everywhere and at all times. Underlying relationships among key variables in the social environment can be stable.

Social knowledge can be cumulative; where underlying stability exists, findings from one time and place can apply to others, hence cumulate.

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TABLE 1 (Continued)

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3. Social analysis must confront and focus upon complex change over time. Social science should strive above all to elucidate processes of change; this can be done rigorously and critically without mathematical and categorical approaches.

4. Social science requires continual research even of ostensibly similar phenomena—research must go on in perpetuity because the social environment changes continually but often in complex and unforeseeable ways. New research has to keep re-evaluating existing as well as building new knowledge.

5. Social science should explicitly recognize that different times and cultures are alike. Choices of research topics should reflect this. Extra-temporal and extra-spatial conclusions should be shunned.

6. Social analysis should synthesize empirical knowledge and non-empirical insights resulting from thinking. It should recognize the importance of creative and multi-faceted interpretation. It should recognize that the mental structures by which we interpret data are an integral part of any reality involving that data. Empirical data alone are meaningless.

7. The discipline of History should be utilized, both in its essential subject matter of time and change and in its use of multiple research paradigms. Philosophy can also provide guidance. The natural sciences are less useful as guides because their subject matter has little in common with that of social science.

8. Researcher objectivity and intersubjective certifiability are chimeras—they cannot be achieved. Though partisanship should be avoided, the investigator is always and inevitably involved with his/her subject matter through the use of his/her mind. Minds cannot but reflect some personal beliefs as well as common beliefs of one's time and place.

Logical Positivism/Empiricism

Time and complex change are messy, and focusing upon them leads to messy analyses requiring imprecise verbal treatments. Thus, time and change can be assumed away in some analyses, and assumed to follow known and regular patterns in other analyses.

Eventually many areas will require little if any further investigation—they will be fully understood and the understanding will apply to all times and places. Such results will not require re-evaluation.

While social science may deal with different times and cultures, and cite them as examples, the ultimate goal of social science is the derivation of universal laws. Such laws are perfect across-temporal and across-spatial.

Social science should decompose social phenomena into empirically investigable units. Interpretation of results should be restrained—nothing which is not empirically demonstrable—preferably with rigorous mathematical tests—can be accepted. Our mental structures are distinct from the empirical world and their intrusions into social science must be distrusted.

Natural science is the exemplar to be followed by Psychology as the sine qua non for social research. Experimentation and quantification are essential. What applies in the natural sciences must apply in the social sciences. Failure to achieve similar results indicates the inferiority of social science.

Objectivity and intersubjective certifiability are crucial to good social science. They are achievable goals: the investigator can be a pure and time-less vessel through which undisputed results may be discovered. Since other investigators in the social sciences can be the same, they will be able to evaluate results objectively.

For those trained in Positivistically-oriented disciplines Historicism can be extremely disturbing if its full implications are considered seriously. Actually, they are disturbing even to scholars grounded in non-Positivist fields. "No intellect, however hard working, however profound, can take it in an ultimate and definite form," writes one of Historicism's most able interpreters (Croce 1941, p. 78). Even some of those who developed the philosophy took refuge in an occasional universal (Croce 1941, pp. 78-79). But even if we cannot or will not accept Historicism's full implications, we should recognize that its emphasis upon confronting complex social change offers a valuable counterpoint to the inadequate job which our Positivist social sciences do with social change (See Fullerton forthcoming). Historicism shares some of the ideas of the contemporary philosophy of Relativism/Constructionism (Peter and Olsen 1983), but offers both a stronger rationale for these ideas and richer analytical possibilities.

Implications for Consumer Research

Historicism has significant implications for consumer research, both in its philosophical assumptions and its research agenda. Historicism provides a profound philosophical challenge to the received view of most present-day consumer researchers. It is beyond the scope of this paper to determine the ultimate correctness of each of Historicism's differences with Logical Positivism/Empiricism. Certainly the Historicism thrust is weakened by a growing body of work in the history of consumption (e.g., Elias 1978; Fullerton 1979; McDendrick, Brewer, Plumb 1982). But our intent here is not to review this work; it is to stimulate serious reflection about Postivist assumptions—and the kinds of scholarship which they engender. Are consumer research results really cumulative, for example? Are they generalizable across time and cultures? Historicism encourages the questioning of prior work—both conceptual and empirical—before it is accepted as currently applicable. By "prior" we mean any earlier results, even those from a year or two previously.

Similarly, Historicism suggests that results from one culture have to be critically scrutinized before they are applied to other cultures. Historicism stresses the uniqueness of consumer behavior in each culture, even at the same point in time. It implies that many of the North American findings may only apply to consumers socialized in the advanced capitalist economies with their deeply-rooted but ultimately transient obsession with "aggressive consumption".

Historicism suggests a whole new vision of consumption. In this vision consumer behavior is clearly:

- a complex historical phenomenon, subject to intricate and often fundamental changes over time and across spatial and/or cultural units;
- a phenomenon best conceived of as consisting of diverse consumption systems, each held together by its own core values, and each with its own historical individuality;
- a phenomenon for the understanding of which many of the approaches developed by the natural sciences are irrelevant.

To probe this vision of consumer behavior we can utilize but also go beyond the now-conventional focus upon information processing and attitude formation. Techniques for studying attitude formation, for example, can be applied to the examination of values and cultures develop and change over time. Historicism calls for a research agenda which will eschew the search for timeless universals of consumption behavior and concentrate instead upon individual consumption systems. The Historicism agenda calls for research into the ethos of consumption systems. Such work could employ among other methods the advanced techniques of qualitative analysis which are now available and which are being used by some consumer researchers. Historicism calls for research which will probe deeply into the pro-
cesses by which consumption systems evolve over time. To realize the considerable potential of the Historicism the historic vision consumer researchers should work towards substituting a keen and sophisticated awareness of time and change for the indifference towards and avoidance of these demonstrably crucial elements of social life which characterizes current scholarship.

Historicism is a different way of thinking. It can be disturbing. On the other hand, it represents the highly developed intellectual tradition of classic German social thought. Seriously neglected by Anglo-American social science for the past half century, this tradition has the potential to enrich our understanding of consumer behavior in our own time. Thus whether we want to or not, we should come to terms with Historicism.

References


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