



## KAPITEL 7 / CHAPTER 7<sup>7</sup> TRADITIONS OF CLASSICAL POSITIVISM IN MODERN HISTORIOGRAPHY

DOI: 10.30890/2709-2313.2024-32-00-016

### Introduction.

The important tasks of the new Ukrainian historiography include the rise of controversial theoretical problems and the modernization of methodology and methods of scientific research, which are inseparable from its integration into the European and world historiographic space. Therefore, the replacement of the ideas of classical positivism in modern socio-humanitarianism remains an actual problem. To classical positivism, we refer the first positivism, that is, the ideas and works of its founders (O. Comte, H. Spencer, J. St. Mill), H. T. Bockl and his other followers, as well as supporters of the so-called second positivism of the 1880s – 1920s.

Well-known modern researchers (O. V. Yas, B. G. Mogilnitsky, G. P. Myagkov, O. M. Nechukhrin, V. A. Potulnitsky, L. V. Taran, L. O. Zashkilnyak and others) recognize the partial preservation of the positivist canon of historiography in modern historiography. In the doctoral dissertation and monograph «Positivism in historical science in Ukraine (60s of the XIX-20s of the XX century)» [3], numerous articles by us the importance of a more detailed study of the scientific heritage of positivists of the past was constantly emphasized. The materials of the round table «Positivism: reflections on the classical model of historiography» [4], which took place in November 2016 in Kharkiv, showed the importance of further research of the positivist model of historiography, its relevance for the development of modern socio-humanitarian studies.

**The purpose of our article** is to determine the role of the ideas of classical positivism in modern historiography, its role in preserving academic standards of historical writing.

**The research methodology** consists of general scientific principles of historicism and objectivity, special historical methods, in particular problem-historiographic,

---

<sup>7</sup>*Authors: Bohdashyna Olena Mykolaivna*



historical-comparative, historical-genetic, historical-typological, as well as biographical approach.

**Main text.** As is well known, classical positivism denied the ideas of traditional philosophy and criticized metaphysics as a scholastic teaching. The spread of Enlightenment ideas from the end of the 18th century and positivism from the middle of the 19th century. contributed to the reduction of the influence of religion and the church in most European states. It is indicative that even now modern European socio-humanitarianism (with the exception of Polish) is mostly atheistic. At the same time, theology and hegelianism were considered outdated theories that could not rationally explain the historical process. The reception of the ideas of positivism contributed to the spread of the doctrines of darwinism and «vulgar» materialism. With the exception of the last two teachings, positivist assessments of other theories are generally accepted today.

Modern researchers do not deny the proximity of the marxist model of historiography to the positivist one. Marxism developed the ideas of the «fathers» of positivism to extremes: Marxists recognized only one factor - economic one. Positivist historians recognized the class struggle, but did not consider it the main driving force of society, as K. Marx and F. Engels proclaimed. At the same time, both theories were brought together by the new socio-economic problems of historical research, the recognition of the natural nature of the development of society [3, p. 235].

The positivist model of historical writing consisted of the following elements:

1. Theory of social progress. Following the French enlighteners, the positivists called the main criterion of social development the increase of knowledge, the development of education and science [3, p. 326–345]. The positivist interpretation of the theory of progress is still generally recognized among scientists.

2. Recognition of regularities, not laws of Social Development. The search for cause-and-effect relationships is already partly inherent in the previous educational and romantic sociohumanitaristics. Positivists believed that the history of society should be studied using sociological and biological laws. The thinkers of the second half of the XIX century were faced with the task of finding stable development trends inherent in



all or individual periods of society's development. The presence of such trends (laws, regularities) was easier to show using examples from socio-economic history [3, p. 250], which, by the way, brought positivism and marxism closer together. The latter became a continuation of positivism, and later its opponent.

3. Theory of factors. In the theological concept of the historical process God was declared the main Demiurge. H. V. F. Hegel claimed that society develops in accordance with the world spirit. H. Spencer showed that social development is influenced by various factors: economy, population (later M. M. Kovalevsky will call this factor demotic), politics, law, religious, moral (ethical), ideology, science, culture.

Marxists, as you know, called the economy the root cause of most historical phenomena. Positivists, unlike marxists, considered all factors to be equal, allowing the priority of certain factors in certain periods. For example, M. S. Hrushevsky has repeatedly noted that at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries. in Ukrainian history, the main church factor was [3, p. 385–399].

4. Theory of social evolution. H. Spencer and his followers believed that society develops like biological organisms. Biological reductionism deprived public opinion of the ideas of divine providence and national spirit. The theory of social evolution contradicted the romantic vision of history as a series of cataclysms and sharply reduced the importance of individual prominent figures in history. Evolutionary theory contributed to the development of ethnology and archeology and a more active study of the initial stages of the development of world civilization. In particular, it stimulated the use of the historical and comparative method to study the history of various states and ethnic groups [3, p. 346–363].

The declaration of social evolution as a normal path of historical development provided a theoretical justification for the expediency of gradual reforms rather than revolutions. Positivists recognized the revolution as an extreme way out of the economic and/or political crisis. At the same time, the bloody nature of the course of events, the frequent non-implementation of their tasks and the mostly negative consequences of revolutionary coups were emphasized.

All these elements of the positivist model of historical writing form the basis (with



additions and changes) of the modern theory of the historical process. Understanding the ideas of sociology, which was perceived by most scientists as a new philosophy of history, often led to their own theoretical construction of the historical process. The ideas of positivism fit especially organically into the enlightenment and marxist preferences of individual scientists. Today, we are also witnessing the strengthening of the influence of not only the latest sociological ideas on the entire social humanitarianism.

The problematic field of historical science in the second half of the 19th century. was expanded the expense of key topics of socio-economic history, research of the activities of broad social strata, national and social movements [3, p. 435–436]. The subject of modern historical research has expanded significantly in recent times. However, socio-economic and political problems remain in the topics of many dissertations and other types of scientific works.

The positive aspects of the positivist version of historical writing were factographism and documentalism. According to the positivist canon, historians in their professional activities need to establish, collect, classify and investigate the entire available set of facts. The factual style of presentation of historical events and phenomena often prevailed over the generalization of historical facts. Most modern scientific works are also typically factual.

The documentaryism proclaimed by positivist historians, supported by the empiricism of natural science discoveries, in those specific conditions contributed to increasing the specialization of scientific research, including the transition from the description (sometimes inventing) of historical facts to the analysis of real historical phenomena and events. The truthfulness of historical facts had to be proven not by deductive reasoning, but by source information.

By documentalism, we mean the absolutization of the role of the historical source. In the works of the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. the widely quoted aphorism of Sh. Senyobos and Sh.-V. Langlois: «History is written according to documents. Nothing can replace documents: there are none, and there is no history» [2, p. 135; 3, p. 313].



In the modern period, the most complete and reliable use of historical sources remains one of the markers of scientific work. For the most part, modern researchers continue to comply with the requirements of searching for and further introducing new historical sources into scientific circulation: archival documents, archaeological or other museum exhibits, collected in interviews.

The ideas of positivism had a significant impact on the development of the theory and methodology of historical source studies, in particular, on the development of the concept of a historical source and the rules for working with different groups and types of sources.

Chernihiv researcher A. M. Ostryanko explains the reasons for the preservation of the positivistic method of source studies in this way: «Despite the significant volume of source complexes, painstaking work on identifying and processing sources carries a lot of discoveries at the level of facts, which will be objectified precisely on the basis of positivism» [5, p. 111]. A well-known source scholar gives other arguments:: «Given the gaps in the source base on the history of modern Ukraine, which is the result of the contradiction between the constant development of „high technologies” and the problems of information preservation (phones, internet, etc.; electronic document management; information on electronic media, etc.) , there is a threat that in the presence of technical means of information processing, history will have to be studied exclusively from „traditional” written sources, which makes the methodology and methods of positivism relevant for the long term» [5, p. 111]. And he further writes: «The creation of an intensive flow of electronic data of various content, quality of information, formats, etc. makes it necessary to use positivist approaches for the verification of these information messages, separating falsification, forgery, spam» [5, p. 111].

We fully agree with the following statement by A. M. Ostryanko: «The positivist approach remains the basis for creating a multidimensional text from the point of view of chronology, geography and content, which is the history of Ukraine, which is characterized by evolutionism, focus on the creation of state life, which in the historical narrative is realized according to using a problem-chronological approach» [5, p. 110–



111]. At the same time, I do not agree with the categorical opinion of A.M. Ostryanko about the ineffectiveness of positivist standards in the study of everyday history, gender studies, intellectual biography and prosopography [5, p. 111]. Because all researchers of written sources use the methodology that was created at one time by positivists and is now only modified.

The majority of positivist historians called historical sources monuments of the past, which contain information about historical events and phenomena. Their approach was closer to the marxist one, where historical sources were interpreted primarily as products of certain social relations [3, p. 318]. The positivist approach to determining the historical source (in new editions) prevails in most works to this day.

The development of the methodology of working with historical sources led to the spread in Ukrainian (as well as in Western European) historiography at the end of the 19th century concepts of external and internal criticism. Only in the 1960s it was modernized into the theory of analytical and synthetic source criticism [2, p. 101–106].

It is no coincidence that the main scientific school in Ukrainian historiography of the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries. in the literature, is called the name «Kyiv documentary school» for the increased attention of M. D. Ivanishev, V. B. Antonovych and their students to such a group of sources as act materials. The latter were mostly kept in archives and private collections, and only a small part of them was made public or at least used by researchers. Positivists were convinced that act sources are the most truthful and objective, and therefore best suited for establishing historical facts.

The positivist model of historical writing included a number of research principles and methods. Positivists attached a cult value to the principle of objectivity and tried to abandon political, religious or other engagement. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, researchers abandoned the principle of partisanship and support the opposite principle of objectivity. The use of the principle of systematicity was considered important for every major study, especially a dissertation. The active use of the historical-comparative method in works on the history of different states and ethnic groups proved the similarity of the norms of customary law and the process of state





formation in ancient times. Reorientation of some historians in the last third of the 19th century to socio-economic topics led, in particular, to the widespread use of statistical methods. The historical-genetic method has gained considerable popularity among researchers. It was the more active use of the above-mentioned principles and methods of scientific research that distinguished the positivist model of historical writing from the previous ones. Now all these methods are generally accepted in the scientific environment community.

The positivist model of historical writing, which involved the use of a large number of sources, stimulated a significant expansion of the source base of historical science. This is also evidenced by the intensification of archeographic work and the development of archival institutions.

In contrast to the current historiographical situation, there were few examples of violations of academic integrity in the universities of Ukraine in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

After the successful defense of D. I. Bahaliy's master's thesis «History of the Seversky land to the pol. XIV century» at St. Volodymyr's Kiev University (September 26, 1882) and election as a full-time associate professor of the Department of Russian history at Kharkiv University, a review of another student of V. B. Antonovich I. A. Linnichenko was published in the «Journal of the Ministry of National Education» («Журнал Министерства народного просвещения»). The review convincingly proves D. I. Bahaliy's broad borrowings of other authors. This large article dealt a serious blow to the scientist's reputation [7]. In his memoirs «Autobiography: fifty years on guard of Ukrainian science and culture» (1927), D. I. Bahaliy even tries to explain this unfortunate incident [1, p. 33, 44 approx.].

Modern plagiarists often do not even publicly respond to accusations of misappropriation of other people's intellectual property.

In 1875 graduate student of the Department of state law of European states of Kharkiv University M. M. Kovalevsky in his first article, published in French in the Brussels journal «Revue du droit international et de législation comparée», accused the head of the department A. M. Stoyanov in plagiarism. A. M. Stoyanov in «Essays on



the history and dogmatics of international law» used the manuscript of D. I. Kachenovsky without mentioning the real author [4, p. 84–85].

Positivists considered the study of original (if possible) written sources to be one of the requirements of scientific work. For example, professors G. I. Chelpanov, M. M. Bubnov and V. V. Vodovozov, who were present at the defense of E. V. Tarle's master's thesis at St. Vladimir's Kiev University on October 14, 1901, criticized the research on «Utopia» by T. More. A graduate student of I. V. Luchytsky translated the text of T. More's main work into Russian not from the Latin original, but from the German edition of «Utopia». The German edition was also a translation from an English-language book. The majority of those present still voted for granting the dissertation a master's degree in world history. Scandalous information about the defense even got into Kiev newspapers [6].

Such examples of academic dishonesty were rare (in contrast the modern historiographical situation). Characteristic features of most works of positivist historians were increased reference to other authors, extensive citation of sources (mainly act materials), factual presentation of the material, a complex apparatus of notes, archeographic applications.

### **Summary and conclusions.**

Modern requirements for academic texts, rules for dissertation defenses and other norms of scientific life are based on the positivist traditions of the second half of the 19th century. Thus, the generally accepted requirement for dissertations on historical topics was and still is the use of new (mostly archival) documents. Fortunately, the positivist tradition of using mostly act materials over narrative sources for many research topics has been preserved to this day.

In modern historiography, there is a mix of the latest concepts: post-positivist, post-modern, and others. Modern pluralism in the methodology of social and humanitarian sciences demonstrably disagrees with the preservation of the main features of the positivist methodology of working with historical sources. The circumstance (in our opinion) does not hinder, but contributes to the preservation of





scientific standards of historiography. The modern pluralism of the methodology of socio-humanitarian sciences is significantly discordant with the preservation in the main features of the positivist methodology of working with historical sources. The last circumstance (in our opinion) does not interfere, but contributes to the preservation of scientific standards of historiography. We are convinced of the need for further preservation of positivist traditions (of course, taking into account methodological innovations) in the research culture of modern historians.