

NARRATIVE AND HISTORY: HAYDEN WHITE'S OBJECTIONS TO SCIENTISTIC CHANGES TO THE STUDY OF HISTORY

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ABSTRACT: This essay will explore the idea of narratives, with the intention of understanding what insight the study of narrative can offer the disciplines concerned with greater human comprehension. One of these disciplines is social science, which includes economics, political science, human geography, psychology and sociology. In a wider sense, for the discussion in this essay, social science is thought to envelop fields in the humanities such as philosophy, anthropology, history, and linguistics. The purpose of this discussion is to highlight that that growing scientism in fields of social science and the humanities has corresponded with the relegation of their importance in academic institutions. This essay will argue that these fields need to cease attempts to imitate scientific disciplines and attempting to adopt their claims to validity and to reassert their own intellectual strength by reinstating the understanding and creativity that emerges from the appreciation of stories in the social world. This will be explored specifically through the study of history, historiography, and the problems that it has suffered through the adoption of positivism and an according hostility towards narrative and literary thinking.

KEYWORDS: History; Narrative; Phenomenology; White; Collingwood; Gare

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the 19th Century, historical writing and literary writing maintained a peaceful ideological harmony. Following the work of Aristotle, the general conception was that historical writing considered the real world and literary works (which Aristotle referred to as 'poetry') contemplated the possible, whilst maintaining that both were essentially rhetorical tasks. This remained so until the 19th century, during which there was a

reformulation of the concept of history resulting in a theorisation of the historical consciousness, hailing the inauguration of the positivistic scientific method of historical inquiry. For the first time, history was not merely the past or an account of it, but subsequently come to be idealised as something to be examined, a mechanistic component in the system of human existence. In 1973, Hayden White published *Metahistory*, which succeeded in regaining the connection with the earlier conception of history, through the philosophical elucidation of a fundamental literary nature within history, specifically narratives. White's theory reasserted that the production of any historical text was comparable to that of literature in that it was essentially an imaginative task; and the subsequent creation had significantly more in common with a work of fiction than many historians would readily concede. Through this, White challenged the dominant scientific orthodoxy, and emphasised the contention that historians' work inevitably takes a literary form. As a consequence of this action, they are culturally determined to shape the interpretation of history, to 'emplot' it, in a specific narrative derived from a particular ideological and contingent position.¹ This poses the question of how the relationship between history and narrative contributes to addressing the problems of compartmentalisation, disembodiment, logical inconsistencies and flawed ideology prevalent within modern socialscience, which will be explored in more detail throughout this essay. This question will be analysed specifically in relation to a historiography of the philosophy of history prior to and following the adoption of White's method, considered through a study of narrative and finally reflected onto social science. This essay will argue that historiography suffered a loss when it attempted to assert its legitimacy through the adoption of an analytic scientism, and was only redeemed through the application of a speculative approach in the form of White's metahistory and the formation of a grand narrative. If a grand narrative was able to address the problems within historical studies brought about by science, then perhaps the problems of social science could be solved by considering its own grand narrative. By illuminating the centrality of stories to life and physical reality, this essay is tasked to reveal the potential of stories to transform civilisation. This is important because, without an adequate narrative, history was left in an epistemological limbo as a consequence of ill-considered attempts to establish itself, only through self-reflection was it able to find legitimacy. It is the hope that this formulation will incubate the potential for a post-reductionist social science, and in doing hopes to reconcile estranged fields such as the sciences, the arts and the humanities, and provide the basis for more satisfactory social and political philosophies.

¹ Geoffrey Roberts, *The History and Narrative Reader*, London, Routledge, 2001, p. 375.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NARRATIVE

It is essential to begin by illuminating the essence of narratives. It must first be explained that a narrative is not simply a chronological sequence of events, since, as Hume points out with the rock and the broken window postulate, sequence is not necessarily causation.² To examine this further, if history were merely a sequence, a list of meaningless events occurring one after the other, then the only mode in which to examine human action or judgments of their effects would have to be by assessing singular moments. It would be a feat of human consciousness to live contingently passing from one excruciatingly experienced existential moment to another. So to find meaning in experience, one must allow some sort of causation to generate the next step and some sort of context to generate meaning. From one moment in time, this causal significance permits transition to the next moment in time and so on, as Zeno regards arrows moving through space. Artigiani emphasises that

Values, Ethics and Morals map the effects of actions on societies, demonstrating meaning arises naturally in history. In the absence of causal explanation, history is intellectually devastated, for there is no meaning in a sequence of isolated events.³

This contextual structuring of experience is the essence of narrative. By virtue of this simple model, it emerges that the importance of narratives goes far beyond their foundational importance within literature. In fact, narratives are presupposed by and the condition for all abstract thinking especially in regards to science, mathematics and symbolic logic. Kauffman notes:

Story is the natural way we autonomous agents talk about our raw getting on with it, mucking through, making a living. If story is not the stuff of science yet is about how we get on with making our ever changing livings, then science, not story, must change. Our making our ever-changing livings is part of the unfolding of the physical universe. We need both science and story to make sense of a universe in which we are agents, part of the universe, get on with our embodied know-how, we who strut and fret our hour upon the stage.⁴

From this understanding it becomes apparent that narratives, in multifarious forms, are central to the spectrum of social and intellectual life. In this way, the history of European civilization is characterised by the unceasing re-imagination of both

²Clayton Roberts, *The Logic of Historical Explanation*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996, p. 43.

³Artigiani, Robert, 'History Science and Meaning', *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2007, p. 34.

⁴Stuart Kauffman, *Investigations*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 119.

fictional and historical narratives. The point that emerges from these discussions is that narratives are foundational to all historical activities, and if the superficially chronological and transitory elements of history are transcended, it becomes apparent that transformations in the processes of language, culture and writing over time are essentially narrative also.

This viewpoint also is taken up by other theorists, notably Paul Ricoeur, who situates narrative as vital to our essential cognitive activities. Jean-François Lyotard also asserts the essentiality of narrative, specifically within political critique and praxis, and even Jacques Lacan notes the importance of narrative in psychoanalysis.⁵ Arran Gare takes this argument further and asserts that 'one of the most important intellectual tasks is the defence of narrative.'⁶ Fredric Jameson aligns with this position and states that 'the all-informing process of narrative' is 'the central function or instance of the human mind.'⁷ Accordingly, to take Jameson's perspective further, the depreciation of the importance of narratives is expressive of something fundamentally amiss in human culture, and, by extension, a symptom of the collapse of the temporal organisation of people's lives. Prior to WWII, Walter Benjamin observed the relegation of stories in place of information and, since then, narratives have continued to progressively lose status.⁸ Literary deconstructionists in the tradition of Derrida have perpetuated this denigration by deconstructing theories and discourses, serving only to compartmentalise and further destabilise their cognitive claims. These attacks are not recent phenomena, though, and one hopes to reveal throughout this essay that history and narratives have been suffering crises for some time. Gare emphasises this point, stating that:

Postmodernists have embraced this decline in narratives, particularly metanarratives, as in some way liberating. It would seem that narratives, and the humanities, have finally been defeated by the cognitive claims of the scientists.⁹

These crises are associated with the increasing monopoly of scientism combined with a decline in accord and emphasis placed upon social science and the humanities within education institutions. This is seen most clearly in the areas of social science which are

⁵Paul Ricoeur, 'What is a Text', in Mario Valdes (ed.), *A Ricoeur Reader*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1991, p.1.

⁶ Arran Gare, 'The Primordial Role of Stories in Self-Creation', *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2007, p. 114.

⁷Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, Ithica, Cornwell University Press, 1981, p. 16.

⁸Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nicolai Leskov,' in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York, Schocken Books, 1969, p. 87.

⁹ Gare, 'The Primordial Role of Stories in Self-Creation', p. 94.

closely associated with narrative forms, specifically history and literary studies, and has resulted in both historians and philosophers coming to question the merit of exploring the relationship between narrative coherence and life.¹⁰

THE LOSS OF NARRATIVE IN HISTORICAL STUDIES

This problem of the denigration of stories within western thought arose due to the perception of narrative understanding as unimportant in comparison to disciplines concerned with discovering eternal truths, specifically mathematics and science. Following the philosophy of Plato, wisdom grew to be associated with accumulating understanding of that which is unchanging, such as the laws of nature, logical truths and mathematics.¹¹ This contrast between eternal and dynamic approaches spawned a long debate between the proponents of a proto-scientific, analytic interpretation of history, and those emphasising intelligibility and understanding of history through narrative.¹² Geoffrey Roberts begins his 2001 book, *The History and Narrative Reader*, by summarising this debate. Roberts illustrates that the particular theorists in support of a narrative understanding of history are historians and philosophers who emphasise that historical narratives are stories of action, and that it is the account of human action in narrative terms that makes historical studies meaningful and provides valuable explanations of the human past.¹³ This aligns with an inherently hermeneutic account following from the recognition that the meaning of human action is always accessible to us because we ourselves are meaning endowed beings who participate in a shared life-world.¹⁴ Roberts' exploration into the theory and methodology of history reveals that narrative foregrounds all historical practice, from historical understanding of human action to linguistics and social theory. Despite Roberts' foundational research, the postmodernists maintain that the truth of historical narratives is not a matter of fact but of values, and there is gathering support to refocus attention back towards the tradition of seeking objectivity and compartmentalisation in the study of history.¹⁵

Alasdair MacIntyre is opposed to this kind of abstraction and, in his examination of dramatic narratives and the philosophy of science, he explores the manner in which the reception and recognition of a potential new theory are reliant entirely upon the

¹⁰Arran Gare, 'Narratives and Culture: The Role of Stories in Self-Creation', *Telos*, vol. 122, 2002, p. 80.

¹¹ Artigiani, 'History Science and Meaning', p.48.

¹² Roberts, *The History and Narrative Reader*, p. 1.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, New York, Continuum Publishing, 1967, p.219.

¹⁵ Gare, 'The Primordial Role of Stories in Self-Creation', p. 94.

ability of its defenders to construct an adequate narrative surrounding their claims for validity. MacIntyre utilises the following examples to assert the above point:

Wherein lies the superiority of Galileo to his predecessors? The answer is that he, for the first time, enables the work of all his predecessors to be evaluated by a common set of standards. The contributions of Plato, Aristotle, the scholars at Merton College, Oxford and Padua, the work of Copernicus himself at last all fall into place. Or to put matters in another and equivalent way: the history of late medieval science can finally be cast into a coherent narrative.... What the scientific genius, such as Galileo, achieves in his transitions, then, is not only a new way of understanding nature, but also and inseparably a new way of understanding the old sciences way of understanding... It is from the stand-point of the new science that the continuities of narrative history are re-established.¹⁶

MacIntyre shows that the success of an aspiring theory will only be actualised by the recognition that it is working within the framework of all preceding theories and will be positioned within a succession of theories to come. Once it is realised that this theory shares its greatest strengths and limitations with a long tradition of similar theories suffering analogous defeats and triumphs, then it becomes apparent that there is a fundamental grand narrative at work behind the scenes. Furthermore, it will be revealed that there is indeed possibility for objective claims to knowledge, that knowledge is universal, and all the success of past theories has only been by virtue of the historical narratives that they themselves have depreciated.

HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY

In the previously discussed tradition of denigrating the value of historical studies, it should be noted that, in fact, philosophy had not considered history a worthy object of philosophical consideration throughout most of its past.¹⁷ For the ancient Greeks, philosophy became predominantly a metaphysical activity, and saw it as a quest for timeless truth. The Greeks sought clarification of the immutable reality that existed behind an otherwise shifting façade whereas, they considered history to be concerned only with the contingent, the fluctuating and the subjective.¹⁸ By virtue of this approach, history was positioned as being fundamentally antithetical to philosophy. Thereby the prospect that history could become a part of philosophical inquiry or even yield substantial philosophical insight gave rise to a fundamental break with from

¹⁶MacIntyre, Alistair, 'Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science', *Monist*, vol. 60, no. 4, 1977, pp. 459, 460 & 467.

¹⁷Artigiani, 'History Science and Meaning', p. 48.

¹⁸Roberts, *The Logic of Historical Explanation*, p. 12.

Greek and Cartesian traditions. This is especially apparent when bearing in mind that, prior to the 19th century, history was considered to be mere rhetoric, a subset of literature that was not practiced professionally. Voltaire bears an obvious exception, though his work is more perceived as poetic historiography.¹⁹

This was social norm until Leopold von Ranke began the project of grounding history in a rigorous empirical method, built around primary sources and qualitative research.²⁰ This task was ground-breaking in its legitimation of the study of history as profession, but in doing so Ranke aimed to detach history from literary genres, and from all generalising explanations, specifically narratives. In his 1824 *History of the Latin and German Peoples*, Ranke states that the historian must always aspire to 'show the past as it really was,' which meant the author restricting themselves exclusively to the 'facts,' whilst purging historical writing of all dilettantish and extrinsic facets.²¹ Ranke's vision was to move away from a narrative understanding of history to create objectivist historical knowledge. The result of his efforts was that the study of history became a quasi-scientific endeavour, leading directly to the establishment of today's form of history as a positivistic discipline.

The problem is that the foundation of this method is built on contradictory premises, the irony being that in Ranke's criticisms of a narrative understanding of history, his objectivism is working contingently within an established and implicitly historical philosophy. Any exploration into Ranke's objective method of historical inquiry reveals that his approach was not as common-sensical or neutral as it would claim, but is actively presupposed by a specifically developed ontological worldview. This fallacy of contradictory premises gathers further momentum when taking into account that Ranke's description of narratives as the most 'natural' or 'transparent' medium of representation is an argument founded within and borrowed from the mimetic tradition of writers of historical fiction, whom Ranke actively disparaged.²²

Despite the hollow foundation upon which Ranke's argument is built, his work influenced the eventual divergence of the development of professional historiography and the establishment of a philosophy of history. While philosophers such as Marx and Nietzsche regarded professional historians to be naïve or obsequious, historians at the time viewed the philosophy of history as a threat to their efforts to achieve objectivity and their monopoly over the recognised method for ascribing meaning to

Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, p. 50.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p.140.

²¹ Cited in White, *Metahistory*, p. 140.

²² *Ibid*, p. xxii.

history.²³The resulting attitudes of historians are profoundly different to the goal of a philosophy of history. This should be to discover a unified, overarching understanding of history, constructed from the innovations and sentiments put forward by philosophers and historians alike, therein considering history as a universal whole. This method, as practiced by Hegel and Marx, formulates a speculative approach²⁴ to grasp large swaths of history in order to accurately describe the grand shape of history, and thereby offering a universalising and normative account of the path of human civilisation. This approach to history can be traced back to Saint Augustine, often considered to be the ‘founder of the philosophy of history’. As Christopher Dawson, observes:

[Saint Augustine] does not discover anything from history, but merely sees in history the working out of universal principles. But we may well question whether Hegel or any of the nineteenth-century philosophers did otherwise. They did not derive their theories from history, but read their philosophy into history.²⁵

So, whereas Ranke sees the historian as perceiving historical meaning as existing essentially or permanently in historical fact, Augustine reveals that the philosopher of history inevitably endows history with extrinsic meaning. Dawson continues this argument, and makes the point that ‘it was only when history entered into relations with philosophy and produced the new type of philosophical historians... that it became one of the great formative elements in modern thought.’²⁶ In other words, according to Dawson and St. Augustine, every great historian is, in some sense, a philosopher of history.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF METAHISTORY

Through this exposition, there began a new tradition of a speculative philosophy of history. Continuing in this new tradition, Dawson states in the conclusion of his 1951 essay *The Problem of Metahistory* that ‘all historiography is... pervaded by metahistorical influences.’²⁷ It is this idea that inspired White to develop his 1973 magnum opus, *Metahistory*.

²³*Ibid*, p. 116.

²⁴Arran Gare, ‘Speculative Metaphysics and the Future of Philosophy: The Contemporary Relevance of Whitehead’s Defence of Speculative Metaphysics’, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 77, no.2, 1999, p. 130.

²⁵Christopher Dawson, *Dynamics of World History*, London, Sheed and Ward, 1956, p.289.

²⁶ Dawson, *Dynamics of World History*, p. 282.

²⁷*Ibid*, p. 283.

Dawson's essay was quite revolutionary for the time and is, in many ways, a reaction against Anglo-American thought in the first half of the 20th century, which seemed to hold philosophy of history in low regard and had disconnected academic historians from their field's philosophical roots. In his essay, Dawson expresses a suspicion that academic animosity toward metahistory stemmed less from the metahistorical approach per se, but is specifically directed at the philosophical views advocated by metahistorians themselves.²⁸ Dawson describes this:

Historians today are in revolt against the metahistory of Hegel and Croce and Collingwood, not because it is metahistorical, but because they feel it to be the expression of a philosophical attitude that is no longer valid; just as the liberal historians of the eighteenth century revolted against the theological metahistory...²⁹

White resonates with this sentiment in his 1973 essay, entitled 'The Politics of Contemporary Philosophy of History', and contends that:

The term metahistorical is really a surrogate for 'socially innovative historical vision.' What the philosophers and the historians themselves call 'straight' history is the historical vision of political and social accommodationists.³⁰

It emerges from these extracts that both Dawson and White are arguing that the perceived distinction between 'straight' history and metahistory is really a distinction between the status quo, conventional (scientific) paradigm and the revolutionary speculative-narrative metahistorical program. It is only when this distinction is understood that it becomes apparent that the negative view of metahistory or speculative philosophy of history demonstrated by many 20th century Anglo-American philosophers was not an opposition on intellectual grounds, but one based in the fear of new or different ideas, and therein the fear losing legitimacy.

HISTORY'S FABIAN STRATEGY

Despite the evidence for the importance of the history and the contextualising effect of narrative, the historical field in the 20th century had still not found its deserved legitimacy. As a consequence, many historians found it beneficial to employ something of a Fabian strategy against those criticising their intellectual endeavours. So, when faced with criticism from social scientists for the translucence of their method or the

²⁸*Ibid*, p. 282.

²⁹*Ibid*, p. 283.

³⁰Hayden White, *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957–2007*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010, p. 114.

ambiguity of their sociological presuppositions, the historian contended that historical inquiry never embraced the category of pure science. As a consequence, and despite its analytical method, historical judgements tend to be made intuitively and therefore the field should not be held up to the same critical standards as scientific and experimental endeavours.³¹ This defence suggests that historians consider their field to be something of an art. But, when criticised for their incomplete literary representation and lack of overall humanism, the historian regressed to an insistence on the scientific elements of their method and maintained that historical data should be dealt with in much the same way as experimental data.³² Just as Roman general Quintus Fabius avoided defeat at the hands of Hannibal by never fully engaging his enemy, historians found success by taking up this method to disarm their critics. The unfortunate consequence of not asserting their field in the face of criticism was that history never fully developed an ideological or methodological identity, and remained in an epistemological limbo between science and the humanities. Though this uncertainty has plagued the discipline, there is the potential to see an opportunity for history to provide a gateway, a meeting point between art and science so as to mediate a harmonious synthesis between the two disciplines that would otherwise be ultimately polarised. Unfortunately, history never took this risk and, as a consequence, the two sides remain separate, as expressed by Jean-François Lyotard:

... science - by concerning itself with such things as undecidables, the limits of precise control, conflicts characterized by incomplete information, 'fracta,' catastrophes, and pragmatic paradoxes - is theorizing its own evolution as discontinuous, catastrophic, nonrectifiable, and paradoxical.³³

COLLINGWOOD AND RETURNING NARRATIVES TO HISTORY

This bifurcation between science and the humanities is inevitably counterproductive for both fields, a pivotal concern in the work of Robin Collingwood.³⁴ In his book, *The Idea of History*, Collingwood is concerned to rectify the compartmentalising tradition in social science, and seeks to reassert the epistemological stability of historical narratives against the volatility of the encroaching positivistic sciences.³⁵ In spite of the majority of academic historians at the time emphasising the scientific nature of their discipline, Collingwood viewed historiography as essentially storytelling. This was

³¹ Roberts, *The Logic of Historical Explanation*, p. 282.

³² White, Hayden, 'The Burden of History', *History and Theory*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1966, p. 111.

³³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p.60.

³⁴ Robin Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, London, Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 12.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 144.

revolutionary at a time when even schools of literary scholarship during this period were treating literature as isolated from social, political, and historical inquiry.³⁶ In this way, the mainstream fields of both history and literary scholarship maintained an uneasy truce, whilst each asserting their intellectual individuality.³⁷ This was until 1922, when Collingwood penned the article entitled 'Are History and Science Different Kinds of Knowledge?'. In this article, he declares the answer to the title question to be that any perceived distinction between the two fields is in fact an illusion, a position contrary to the traditional view.³⁸ Collingwood examines history from Aristotle until the 19th century, showing that science and history were dealt with as being opposite to each other, but objects that this understanding is based on a false conception of the essence of each field of study. The general conception of history is that it usually deals with generalisations, but Collingwood shows that the application of generalisations is also a fundamental characteristic of science, since metaphors are essentially generalisations, and as Harré points out, metaphors are essential to scientific inquiry.³⁹ It then becomes evident, according to Collingwood, that making creative generalisations about the collected facts is necessary in order to achieve some form of interpretation, and he states 'science is this interpretation', claiming:

To live the life of a scientist consists in the understanding of the world around one in terms of one's science. To be a geologist is to look at landscape geologically: to be a physiologist is to look at organisms physiologically, and so on. The object which the scientist cognises is not 'a universal', but always particular fact, a fact which but for the existence of his generalising activity would be blank meaningless sense-data. His activity as a scientist may be described alternatively as the understanding of sense-data by concepts, or the realising of concepts in sensation, 'intuiting' his thoughts or 'thinking out' his intuitions.⁴⁰

Continuing from this argument, it becomes apparent that generally conceived definitions of science are indistinguishable from definitions of history. Collingwood links this connection to fields of speciality within science such as archaeology and palaeography, which draw their material from studies of history. He concludes that science, with its evinced generalisations, must recognise its intrinsic relationship with

³⁶White, 'The Burden of History', p. 440.

³⁷Collingwood, Robin, 'Are History and Science Different Kinds of Knowledge?', *Mind*, vol. 31, no. 124, 1922, p. 33.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 23.

³⁹Harré, R 1970, *The Principles of Scientific Thinking*, Macmillan, London, p. 12.

⁴⁰Collingwood, 'Are History and Science Different Kinds of Knowledge?', p. 28.

history. Together, there can be a greater understanding of natural and cultural phenomena, for this should always be the goal of any field of inquiry.⁴¹

SCIENCE AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

The social sciences are continually plagued by criticism from positivistic sciences, claiming that discussions of culture and society do not warrant scientific consideration, because social processes (such as culture) are merely interactions of base social forces and structures.⁴² It is clear that this criticism is significant for social science, much as the scientific study of natural phenomena can yield knowledge about nature, a well conducted study of society can reveal an understanding of complex social phenomena. Any validity to these claims to knowledge presumes a similarity between the two methods and procedures, which would contradict the previous claims by social science for there to be a presumed difference between the natural world and the social field. So a dilemma emerges, for if the social sciences' claims to authority rest on the substantial similarities between the approaches used for generating knowledge of society and the approach developed for generating knowledge of nature, it would have to have to accept social reality as being constant within and recognisable as a feature of natural reality. If not, the field of social science would have no justification for applying a scientific method to studies within their discipline. Thus, assertions for the autonomy of society in relation to nature, made by proponents of a social science seeking to remove the naturalism of history from their field, are actually undermining claims to a scientific validity for their studies and bolstering the relationship between nature and society.

This is representative of the sorts of breakdowns in reason that are common when proponents of this ideology claim their work to be in isolation, completely free of history, context and socially preconceived views. What can be taken from the exposition of these epistemological failures is that the positivistic social sciences are, despite their claims otherwise, supported by ideological preconceptions and that their reductionist method and assumptions of wielding the 'proper' way to study social phenomena tend to be corrupt.

A NEW PHILOSOPHY FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE

In addressing the problem of whether the social sciences are context-specific or culturally determined, White develops the argument that 'the social sciences are

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 31.

⁴² Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1970, p. 429.

contextually determined and involved directly in the social and political issues at play in the time and place of their practice.⁴³ In this respect, White's philosophy asserts that it would be impossible to construct a functioning social science within a society without it gathering ideological preconceptions from that society. Thus, he counters the claim that a scientific historiography does not contain ideology or narrative because not even the science that underpins it could be free from cultural influence. This idea aligns with György Lukács, who asserts that every viewpoint within or of society is inescapably pervaded with ideology, and that this ideology is actually a reflection of social consciousness.⁴⁴ White viewed this point to be profoundly positive, since he believed that the task of any study of society should participate with, and be in the service of, a particular notion of social justice, freedom and progress.⁴⁵ Essentially, White is arguing that social science should be concerned with an idea of what society should be and, by virtue of this, the notion of an ideal society can only emerge from recognition of and reflection upon the culture history of that particular society.

Viewpoints such as this were in the ascendant until the 1960's, but remained under the umbrella of the avant-garde social movement. Thankfully, this movement had an influence on philosophy at the time, pervading new social theories constructed by Nietzsche, Freud and Weber.⁴⁶ It was particularly the case for the 1966 publication of Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, which assisted the blossoming poststructuralist movement in French thought during this period. Unfortunately, however, *The Order of Things* was not specifically regarded as contributing to the historical field at the time, or indeed the philosophy of history.⁴⁷ Much like Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* four years earlier, Foucault's work was also a victim of its epoch, being published at a time in which the ideas and values of society, and therefore history, was brought into question by the emerging deconstructionist postmodern movement. It wasn't until 1979, with the publication of Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* that these ideas were readdressed. In his book, Lyotard identifies the philosophy of history as 'grand narratives', which he viewed as no longer necessary in the postmodern society.⁴⁸ However, although Lyotard was essentially announcing the obsolescence of the philosophy of history, his work was fundamentally a philosophy of history, a metanarrative describing the end of

⁴³Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, p. 429.

⁴⁴Carl Boggs, *The Two Revolutions: Antonio Gramsci and the Dilemmas of Western Marxism*, Boston, South End Press, 1984, p. 167.

⁴⁵White, 'The Burden of History', p. 125.

⁴⁶Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, London, Fontana Press, 1977, p. 124.

⁴⁷White, 'The Burden of History', p. 2-3.

⁴⁸Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 24.

metanarratives. In this regard, it is evident that the works of Foucault and Kuhn should be regarded as successful philosophies of history since they were, in White's phrase quoted above, 'socially innovative historical vision',⁴⁹ their only shortcoming was their publication during a period of cultural and historical disintegration.

WHITE'S DEVELOPMENTS IN SOCIAL SCIENCE

The same year that Foucault published *The Order of Things*, White published his article entitled 'The Burden of History' in the journal *History and Theory*. He challenged the elementary conventions within the field of academic historiography in the 20th century, with the intention of showing that the 'anti-historical attitude' or 'the revolt against historical consciousness' that characterised writing at the time actually amounted to positivism.⁵⁰ This is also indicative of the influence of Jean-Paul Sartre in White's work, with White's central idea of 'choosing one's past' drawing significant parallels to the section of Sartre's 1956 *Being and Nothingness* entitled 'My Past'. This element of Sartre's philosophy describes the presence of a dialectic between what he refers to as 'being-for-itself' (human consciousness) and 'being-in-itself' (all that is not consciousness).⁵¹ One of the major points that Sartre makes is that because people can never be reduced merely to their 'facticity' (which includes their past), and that they are always fundamentally and inescapably free. He maintains this freedom allows people to choose themselves, but they are also obligated to choose themselves in each moment because, he argues, even to refuse to choose is still a choice, thus any passivity would be an illusion and existence is, in essence, a burden for which we are perpetually responsible.⁵² This sentiment is echoed by White in his essay, in which he argues that history, in an ontological-existential regard, is a 'burden' that society must bear. White addresses the problem of attempting to flee this existential responsibility, which Sartre calls 'bad faith', and addresses the way in which this desire stems from a refusal of claims to human transcendence, leading to a denial of this freedom and responsibility.⁵³ White's emphasis upon this brought about reproaches from critics for his perceived 'relativism'.⁵⁴ Despite this, White utilised Sartre's ideas regarding the personal past to formulate his theory. Specifically, he took up Sartre's distinction

⁴⁹White, *The Fiction of Narrative*, p. 114.

⁵⁰White, 'The Burden of History', p. 111.

⁵¹Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel Barnes, New York, Philosophical Library, 1956, p. 134.

⁵²*Ibid.*, p. 621.

⁵³*Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁵⁴Robert Doran, *Philosophy of History after Hayden White*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013, pp. xxv.

between historical fact and historical meaning, using the French revolution as an example,⁵⁵ to argue for the strength of his reconfiguration of social science.

Arguably, it is the purported equivalency with positivistic science that underpins social sciences' claim to be free of influence from the social forces and processes that they study. Supported by the pretence that their method, and therefore integrity, is identical to that of the natural science, social scientists permits themselves to identify their own claims about society as ideology. This becomes of particular relevance when observing claims made by social science that presume society to be extrinsic to nature, since to support its shaky foundation and in order to escape itself being charged as ideological, social science must depict society as both 'natural' and 'historical'.⁵⁶ White uses 'historical' in this sense to refer to something 'coming into existence at a particular time and place by means of human agency', as opposed to manifesting spontaneously.⁵⁷ According to social science, then, society is seen to be something created in much the same way as cultural products or artefacts, such as relics, philosophies, and political systems. These must therefore be seen in opposition to things that emerge organically such as trees, geological strata or the motion of the planets. By extension of this, society comes to be considered as the result of the sorts of processes that produce culture rather than those that produce nature. Thus, if society is defined more like a cultural artefact than a natural entity, then the explanation of its origin and processes must be sought in the study of history than in the study of nature. The result of this thought process comes to prove that even in spite of the attempts of the social sciences to show that they have the monopoly on interpretation of social phenomena, it remains the task of history, and thus stories, to interpret and make meaningful conclusions regarding society. In fact historical studies maintain that the interpretation of society and any of its processes must always be directed towards investigation of its origins, its relations and the implications of socially specific contexts.⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

In this essay, it has been argued that all fundamental human processes, beginning with self-creation and recognition and leading to more abstract undertakings such as science and mathematics, are primordially underpinned by stories. Thus, any

⁵⁵ Sartre 1956, p.643.

⁵⁶White, 'Afterward', p. 317.

⁵⁷*Ibid*, p. 318.

⁵⁸White, 'The Burden of History', p. 202.

discourse seeking to uncover meaning in human action, and examine the basis of culture and social inquiry, must ultimately recognise the need for a narrative conception of history in order to draw any meaningful understanding. This also applies specifically to academic disciplines, as White reminded us above, the ultimate task of scholarship and research is not just interpretation, but also transformation. White's established ability to explore the historical and philosophical origins of historiography are strengthened by his engagement with a wide array of seemingly heterogeneous fields of inquiry, from 19th century philosophy, through French poststructuralist thought, Anglo-American philosophy, literary history and theory, existentialism and hermeneutics. This sort of transdisciplinary thought is all the more important in an age of increasing specialisation, making his theories especially relevant. If the above account of the centrality of stories to human existence is correct, then one would expect societies to place a high value on stories and those who configure them, yet this is in contrast with the actual conventions of modern academia, wherein Gare has shown there to be an inversion occurring between science and the humanities. Traditionally, the humanities accorded a central position to historical and fictional narrative and maintained their potential for understanding the world as equivalent in status to that of the natural sciences. However, as a result of the efforts of Ranke and other social scientists, the humanities have come to be divided, dominated by those wishing to denigrate fields undertaking narrative studies and relegate them as 'unscientific'. In opposition to this are the proponents of a speculative, more humanistic approach, taking up methods associated with giving a central place to narratives. The many causes for this have been exposed throughout this essay, but the underlying foundation is the realisation that through narratives, fields of study are able to transcend the conditions of their existence. Therefore, when a field of inquiry can utilise narrative form, with its inherent reflexivity, to recognise that it is located within a narrative that bears a long tradition, it is therein able to envisage itself as an unfinished story. By considering different versions of this story, and relating it to an extensive world of interrelated stories in which it is participating, interacting and transforming, fields of inquiry can become a genuine force for social and cultural transformation.

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