



Bradley Bowden

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## Abstract

A figure who courted controversy, White’s profound influence on the discipline of management history is acknowledged by friend and foe alike. Like Foucault and Derrida, White made the interrelationship between language and knowledge the key to his unique brand of historiography, declaring that there is always a “fictive character” to “historical reconstruction.” In consequence, “history” was for White “a place of fantasy . . . all story, no plot, no explanation, no ideological implication at all – that is to say, ‘myth’.” For White, historians do not “record” history. Rather they “do” history, creating a new, imaginary world. In exploring the life and ideas of Hayden White from the time of his entry into Detroit’s Wayne State University in the late 1940s, this chapter observes that although White’s ideas were similar to those of French postmodernists, he came to his conclusions via an independent path. In blurring the lines between history and myth, however, White continually confronted difficulty in debates as to whether historical events such as the Holocaust were “historically” real or simply matters of historical representations.

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**Introduction**

The son of a Detroit automobile worker who obtained a veteran's scholarship to Wayne State University after the briefest of stints in the navy during World War II, the late Hayden White (1968a: 10) described the city of his youth as a "cultural and social wasteland." Yet, within this metaphorical wasteland, a student at Wayne State University only had to wander a few hundred meters to find themselves amidst the artistic splendors of one of the world's greatest art galleries, the Detroit Institute of Art. Within its walls any visitor, then as now, was exposed to a wondrous reconfiguration of reality in the works of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Albrecht Dürer, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and an almost countless array of Renaissance and Impressionist masters. Even if a visitor was blind to the institute's art collection, no one could ignore the reconfiguration of Detroit's working experience captured on the wall panels of the gallery's forecourt, the work of the Mexican communist, Diego Rivera. It is thus not entirely surprising that White came to embody a form of history that blurred the distinction between the historical narrative and literature, between the "factual" and the "fictive." Indeed, for White (2005a: 333), history's "subject matter, that is, the past," was "a place of fantasy," an intellectual world where myth and the historical narrative were inseparable.

A figure who courted controversy, White's profound influence on the discipline of management history is acknowledged by friend and foe alike. Writing in the late 1980s, the Dutch postmodernist Frank Ankersmit (1989: 183) declared White's *Metahistory* "the most revolutionary book in the philosophy of history" written in "the previous twenty-five years." In a similar vein, the Australian feminist historians, Ann Curthoys and Ann McGrath (2009: ix), hailed White for redefining "historical writing as writing, as a form of creativity and textuality." Even declared opponents, such as the English Marxist Alex Callinicos (1995: 51), concede that "White's work is undoubtedly the decisive influence on contemporary discussions of history as narrative." Among postmodernist-inclined or "critical" management historians, it is Hayden White – rather than Foucault – that has arguably been most influential in shaping a new dissident tradition within the discipline. In their recent chapter in the *Routledge Companion of Management and Organizational History*, Jacques and Durepos (2015: 96), for example, point to "White's theory of employment" as a model in terms of "how facts and traces get ordered into a story form." In an article in *Academy of Management Review*, Rowlinson et al. (2014: 251) similarly point to White in delineating "the kind of history we mean." In the opinion of the late Alun Munslow (2015: 129, 136) as well, White redefined the nature of "historical work," convincing many that "history" can never be more than "a prose discourse" in which meanings "are fictively constructed."

At first glance White's appeal appears paradoxical. In large part, White's reputation rests on a single book, *Metahistory*, published in 1973. His other major works – *Tropics of Discourse* (White 1978/1985), *The Content of the Form* (White 1987), and *The Practical Past* (White 2014) – are, for all intents and purposes, collections of short essays. It is also fair to say that none of his major works are an easy read. Of his best-selling *Metahistory*, White himself conceded:

... it's an intimidatingly long book. It's very tiresome and repetitive. Most people who read it read some of the introduction and maybe read around a bit. But no one reads it through. (Cited, McLemee 2018: 4)

White's claim to theoretical originality is also threadbare. As White himself willingly acknowledged, his main theoretical claims – that historical “facts” are manufactured by the historian, that the primary purpose of history should be one of inspiration rather than historical accuracy, and that the modern focus on science and rationality has come at a great cost to the human spirit – were drawn from Benedetto Croce, Giambattista Vico, and, to a lesser degree, Friedrich Nietzsche. White's understanding of language, and of the relationship between mythical representations and historical narrative, owed a debt to the French linguist and philosopher, Roland Barthes (Domanska 2008: 3–4; Paul 2011: 91). His argument that any historical narrative was inevitably organized around different “tropes” (i.e., metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony) was obtained from Vico and Kenneth Burke's essay, “Four Master Tropes” (McLemee 2018: 3). Principally concerned with the history of ideas, White's interests were almost solely directed toward Western European philosophy and literature. His most notable study, *Metahistory*, for example, involved a consideration of the ideas of eight (dead white male) European and historians (Hegel, Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, Burckhardt, Marx, Nietzsche, Croce). Not surprisingly, this led to complaints by other “critical” historians that White's work was irredeemably “Eurocentric” (Waldman 1981: 785, 789). While the ancestry of White's theoretical conceptions is found in Italian idealist thought, with his key theoretical texts – “The Abiding Relevance of Croce's Idea of History” (White 1963) and “The Burden of History” (White 1966) – predating the major published works of both Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, it is nevertheless the case that White's ideas are not dissimilar to those of Foucault. Both believed that a “discourse” or “historical narrative” could never be “objective,” given that any discourse or narrative is a social construction, supposedly serving the interests of certain individuals or groups at the expense of others. Highlighting the parallels between his own work and that of Foucault in one of the first English-language critiques of Foucault's ideas, White (1973a) observed that “Foucault represents a continuation of a tradition of historical thought which originates in Romanticism and which was taken up . . . by Nietzsche in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.” As White well understood, an identical comment could be made about his own work.

What explains White's extraordinary appeal among “critically” inclined historians? Why is it that so many historians choose to draw on White's conceptualizations rather than Foucault's, given that the latter had not only greater public

recognition but also a much wider repertoire, exploring themes as diverse as madness, sexuality, prison reform, philosophy, and governmentality?

Arguably the principal attraction of White's work is found in his constant exposition of what his biographer, Herman Paul (2011: Chap. 2), refers to as a "liberation historiography," the belief that the historian should act as the moral guardian of individual freedom. In summing up his lifelong agenda in an interview with Ewa Domanska in 2008, White declared himself in favor of "progressive history," a genre he defined as:

... born of a concern for the future, the future of one's own family, of one's own community, of the human species, of the earth and nature, a history that goes to the past in order to find intimations ... that might be useful for dealing with these concerns. (Cited Domanska 2008: 18)

Whereas Foucault (1975/1991, 1977/1988) depicted the modern human condition as one trapped within the confines of a "disciplinary society," White advocated an essentially anarchistic – or what he would have called "romantic" – view of the world, in which all social institutions are regarded as oppressive. In summing up this "romantic" viewpoint in one of his earliest studies, White (1968b: 52, 55) declared that "the individual is *always* the victim, never the beneficiary, of society," adding that "Romanticism ... regards social institutions, ideas, and values as barriers to overcome" [emphasis in original]. In urging historians to be flagbearers in a universal opposition to authority, White also no doubt won favor by portraying historical writing not as a mundane craft bound to follow the "facts" but rather as "a poetic process" (White 1978/1985: 125), a practice that called for the dissolution of "the very distinction between real and imaginary events" in the cause of human liberation (White 1980: 10).

Associating his type of history with a "poetic" style and a morally virtuous purpose, White depicted more traditional historians as not only epistemologically misguided but also as enemies of freedom, the agents of an oppressive modernity. "What we postmodernists are against," White (2005b: 152) declared late in his career, "is a professional historiography, in service to state apparatuses that have turned against their own citizens, with its epistemically (sic) pinched, ideologically sterile, and superannuated notions of objectivity." Thus, in declaring oneself an adherent of White's methodologies and conceptualizations, one not only associates oneself with a "poetic" style of history but also with a morally virtuous "progressive" cause, a cause that sees one aligned against the dead hand of social reaction as well as outmoded historiographical traditions. Any disciple of White is also granted a license to dissolve accepted meanings in favor of a "liberation historiography." Munslow (2015: 140), for example, in taking inspiration from White, dismissed the practice and profession of management as a mere intellectual construct, arguing that "managers" do not "exist outside (their) discourse."

In White's methodology, the historical process is one constructed around the "event" and the meaning that historians and the wider society ascribe to individual "events" (i.e., the French Revolution, the 9/11 terror attacks). In considering any

individual “event,” White (2014: 46) argued in *The Practical Past* that the key issue is not whether or not the event actually happened but rather “the nature of the event, its relative novelty, the scope and intensity of its impact, and . . . what it reveals about the society in which it took place.” If White had stopped his analysis at this point, there would have been few points of fundamental difference between his understandings of history and those elucidated by earlier generations of historians. Georg Hegel (1837/1956: 11), for example, in his *Philosophy of History*, observed that evidence “is by no means passive,” taking meaning from the conceptual “categories” that the historian brings with them. Similarly, E.H. Carr (1961/2001: 18) in his *What Is History?* – a book that was standard fare when I was an undergraduate – advised erstwhile historians that, “By and large, the historian will get the kind of facts that he [or she] wants.”

For better or worse, White did not stop his description of the historian’s task by noting that the history is built upon interpretation, by weaving “facts” into an explanatory narrative. Instead, White enunciated principles that made him a prophet for some and a pariah for others. “The real” world, White (2005b: 147) proclaimed, consists “of everything that can be truthfully said about its actuality plus everything that can be truthfully said about what it could *possibly* be” [emphasis in original]. White also suggested that history only became “practical” or socially useful when it acted as an agent for “progressive” change. This necessarily entailed, White (2014: 8) advised in *The Practical Past*, a process of historical writing in which “the imagination, intuition, passion, and, yes, even prejudice” are “permitted to take precedence over considerations of veracity, perspicuity, ‘plain’ speech, and common sense.” In abandoning “common sense,” White (2014: 47) also concluded that, “Fantasies of alien cultures in outer space and theories of parallel or antithetical universes” are as “real” as a carefully constructed historical narrative if they “reflect the wish, hope, or fear” of a future fundamentally different to the present.

In giving “fantasies” an equal place alongside – or, rather, within – “history,” White relegated “facts” to a secondary status, declaring: “Facts belong to speech, language and discourse, not to the real world” (cited Domanska 2008: 5). In short, the value of history is found in its capacity to inspire “progressive” social action.

White’s understanding of “facts” and “history” was very different to that enunciated by the French historian, Marc Bloch, who wrote *The Historian’s Craft* on scraps of paper while acting as a resistance leader in occupied France during World War II. Arrested, tortured, and, ultimately, executed by the Gestapo, Bloch (1944/1954: 83) observed, while standing on the edge of the grave, that “we have no right to make any assertion which cannot be verified.” Yes, it is true that “facts” can be discovered, forgotten, contradicted, and interpreted in many different ways. But, contrary to what White and his intellectual followers have argued, the work of the historian is *not* built around the collection of facts so much as in the testing of hypotheses. Facts are only useful to the extent that they facilitate the verification or rejection of our arguments or theses. In this, the historian’s task not only resembles that of the natural scientist but also the carpenter, the architect, and the bridge builder, all of whom are constantly testing theses against verifiable evidence (i.e., will this form of construction result in a stronger or weaker bridge?). In other

words, in history – as in other disciplines – intellectual and social progress is obtained by confronting verifiable evidence, not by imagining a world of fantasy.

In exploring Hayden White and his influence, the body of this chapter will comprise three sections, namely, the idealist antecedents to White's historical understandings and his key publications prior to the release of *Metahistory* in 1973; the work of the "mature" Hayden White between the late 1970s and his death in 2018; and, finally, the ways in which White's work has profoundly influenced management history over the last two decades.

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## Hayden White, 1946–1973

Born in Martin, Tennessee in 1928, Hayden spent his childhood moving backward and forward between his ancestral home and Detroit, where his father obtained work during the Great Depression on a car assembly line. Boasting a humble background, White's personal circumstances were profoundly altered when he enlisted in the navy during the closing months of World War II. Once demobilized, he entered into a bachelor's program in history at Wayne State University with the benefit of a veteran's scholarship. For the rest of his long life, White never again left the hallowed halls of academia. On graduating from Wayne State in 1951, White completed a master's degree at the University of Michigan in 1952, before undertaking doctoral studies on the medieval papacy between 1952 and 1956. During his doctoral studies, White also benefited from a 3-year Fulbright Fellowship (1953–1956), a boon that funded an Italian residence. Having obtained his PhD, White then revisited Italy for another 2-year stint (1961–1962), courtesy of a Social Science Research Council Fellowship (Paul 2008: 78, 2011: 28). Returning to a position at the University of Rochester, White subsequently worked at the University of California, Los Angeles, before going back to Connecticut to take up at a position at Middleton's Wesleyan University. Coming to prominence with the publication of *Metahistory* while at the Wesleyan University, White also benefited from working alongside Richard Vann, the long-term editor of the critically inclined journal, *History and Theory*. His reputation established, White was in 1978 appointed director of the newly established History of Consciousness Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz, retaining a connection with the department for the remainder of his life (Rappaport 2018).

A perusal of White's first significant publication, "The Abiding Relevance of Croce's Idea of History," indicates that by the early 1960s the ideas that White was to articulate over the next half century were already well-formed. From the article's opening paragraph, White (1963: 109) outlined a theme that he returned to constantly in the ensuing decades, declaring: "The social theorist who does not realize that legendary modes of thought will inevitably intrude themselves into his narratives is either epistemologically naïve or is concerned solely with trivial questions." Elsewhere in the article, White (1963: 109, 111, 116, 118) outlined other intellectual positions that were to remain a constant feature of his work: that "Myth, fable and legend loom large in the social thought of our time," that history was only

meaningful when it acted as “a history of human liberty,” and that “when properly narrated, history becomes the equal in transforming power to tragic poetry.”

Evidently, two factors profoundly influenced the thinking of the youthful White. The first of these, as White himself recounted, was a professor of history at Wayne State University, William H. Bossenbrook. Such was White’s affection for Bossenbrook that in 1968 he edited a collection of papers by Bossenbrook’s former students, which was then published by Wayne State under the title, *The Uses of History: Essays in Intellectual and Social History presented to William H Bossenbrook*. In the preface to this collection, White (1968b: 10, 9) recorded how Bossenbrook had the “power to endow ideas with the palpability of perceivable objects,” adding: “Once exposed to Bossenbrook, it was impossible not to consider scholarship as a career . . . it was equally unthinkable not to try to teach and write in ways comfortable to what we thought he would approve of.” If Bossenbrook was clearly decisive in instilling an interest in intellectual history in White, it is nevertheless also evident that he provided the mature White with few if any of his understandings of philosophy or history. As White’s biographer notes, “the graduate student who in 1955 completed his thesis on the papal schism of 1130 did not resemble the White of *Metahistory* or *Tropics of Discourse*” (Paul 2008: 93). The causal factor behind the profound rupture in White’s conceptualizations – turning him from a conventional historian interested in medieval history into a critic of mainstream historiography – was his sojourns in Italy (1953–1955, 1961–1962), where he befriended Carlo Antoni, a disciple of Benedetto Croce and a leading exponent of Italian philosophic idealism. Although White subsequently – as the pages of *Metahistory* make clear – showed a deep interest in German philosophic idealism, White nevertheless differed from postmodernist contemporaries such as Foucault and Derrida in making Croce and Giambattista Vico his primary touchstones rather than Nietzsche and Heidegger.

To understand the genealogy of White’s understanding of history, it is therefore necessary that we first consider the idealist philosophy of both Giambattista Vico (1688–1744) and Benedetto Croce (1866–1952).

In his emphasis on history as poetry, and in “emploting” historical narratives in terms of tropes and metaphors, White owes a particular debt to Vico and his principal work, *The New Science*. Completed in 1744, Vico’s work prefigured German idealist philosophers such as Johann Fichte, Friedrich Schelling, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche in arguing that the advance of Western civilization came at excessive cost to the human spirit. Prior to the numbing effects of civilization, Vico (1744/1968: 118) believed, people possessed “vast imagination,” an imagination that was “entirely immersed in the senses, buffeted by the passions.” As civilization advanced, Vico (1744/1968: 128) argued, so “these vast imaginations shrank.” All that was left were literary “tropes,” “metaphors” that provided a remnant existence of an older, more spiritual way of perceiving the world. In Vico’s (1744/1968: 131) view, “irony” was of particular use in interpreting the modern world as it is “fashioned in falsehood,” thereby allowing for a greater reflection on societal falsehood.

The themes that Vico developed became a constant feature of White’s work. In an article originally published in the journal, *Clio*, in 1974, for example, White (1974/

1985: 91) advised readers that “The historical narrative does not *image* the things it indicates; it *calls to mind* images . . . in the same way metaphor does . . . Properly understood, histories . . . out to be read as symbolic structures, extended metaphors.” Such comments, I suggest, only become fully meaningful if we locate them in the intellectual context that inspired them.

As an extended discussion in *Metahistory* made clear, White’s (1973b: 415–422) opinion of Vico largely mirrored that of Croce, accepting Vico’s emphasis on the “poetic” while rejecting his fundamentally pessimistic view of the human condition, supposedly trapped within the spiritually numbing advances of civilization. By contrast, White’s embrace of Croce was enthusiastic. Indeed, in summing up Croce’s contribution to historiography a youthful White highlighted features of Croce’s work that were to subsequently become hallmarks of his own work. “All of Croce’s historical works,” White (1963: 121–122) accurately noted, were “more properly . . . moral tracts than ‘pure’ scholarship,” his “conception of liberty” revolving around the “rejection” of any institutionalized solution and a corresponding embrace of an individuality freed of restraints. Admittedly, in embracing Croce, White (1963: 110) realized he was associating his own work with a politically tainted product, given Croce’s active support for Mussolini and fascism in the early 1920s. Indeed, White (1963: 110) lamented, “Croce’s reputation has fallen as low as it is ever likely to fall, both in Italy and abroad.” Fortunately for White, however, the fascist associations of Croce no more damaged his own reputation than did Derrida’s framing of his work in concepts derived from the Nazi-inclined Heidegger.

Certainly, if we look to Croce’s understandings – and most particularly his *Theory and History of Historiography* – we can ascertain almost all of the viewpoints that historians later came to associate with White. Like the mature White, Croce (1915/1921: 19, 12) believed that “history is principally an act of thought,” an intellectual construct of the historian. As the experiences of the past are irreparably lost, any historical reconstruction has to be based on “documents” that are – whatever their claimed provenance – nothing more than “narratives,” recorded by some past interest group (Croce 1915/1921: 21, 23). Accordingly, Croce (1915/1921: 75, 69) argued – prefiguring White’s subsequent enunciations – “facts really do not exist,” it being the case that what we think of as “facts are no longer facts . . . but images.” Like the mature White, Croce (1915/1921: 55–57) also repudiated the idea that we can explain historical outcomes through reference to any “universal law.” Instead, Croce (1915/1921: 141) declared – as White was wont to do – that “history is always *particular* and always *special*,” the product of individual thought and action. Indeed, Croce (1915/1921: 107) suggested, history can never properly be more than “the history of the individual.” Consequently, any attempt to explain the “true cause” of events apart from the individual is fatally misguided. In short, for Croce – as, subsequently, for White – history as a lived experience is intensely personal, something that we can never comprehend outside of our own subjective consciousness. History as narrative, by contrast, is a construct of the historian, only fulfilling a useful role when it acts as a source of individual inspiration.

Having in 1963 outlined the principal source of his newfound understandings of history, White completed a more ambitious analysis 3 years later with the publication of “The Burden of History” in the journal, *History and Theory*. Outlining arguments



identical to those found in Croce's *Theory and History of Historiography*, White (1966: 112) condemned "history" for acting as "the conservative discipline *par excellence*," distracting the populace from a necessary process of moral and social renewal based around the unrestrained powers of the individual. Calling for "the destruction of the conventional historian's conception of history," White (1966: 114, 127) advocated in its place a "surrealist, expressionistic, or existentialist historiography." In doing so, White (1966: 131, 130) ridiculed conventional historians for their obsession as to "the facts," arguing that the historian had to behave "like the artist," ordering their historical narrative around metaphors and "the purely imaginary." White also dismissed the idea that historians needed to base their work around verifiable theses, discarding those that proved unsatisfactory and adopting new ones in the light of the evidence. Instead, White (1966: 131) argued that the historian should advance metaphor by metaphor, abandoning the metaphor upon which one started in favor of "another, richer, and more inclusive metaphor." In doing so, White declared that historians had to reject concern for the past in order to embrace a transformative present. As White (1966: 123) expressed it, "only by disenchanting human intelligence from the sense of history" will humanity "be able to confront creatively the problems of the present." In other words, historians had to stop being chroniclers of the past so as to become prophets of the future. In doing so, White (1966: 133) concluded, the historian was bound by "a moral charge to free men from the burden of history," demonstrating to the citizenry "that their present condition" was the result "of specifically human choices." Change our choices, and we change past, present, and future. Or so White would have us believe.

The principles that White enunciated in "The Burden of History" were ones that, in broad brush, he remained loyal to for the rest of his life. In terms of the style of history he was proposing and its relationship with other genres, however, a more detailed picture was provided in the collection of essays that White edited for his former history lecturer from Wayne State, William Bossenbrook. Within this collection, in a chapter entitled "Romanticism, Historicism, and Realism," White argued two main propositions. First, he claimed that there was no fundamental difference between historical narratives and the "romantic" or "realist" literature of novelists such as Walter Scott, Honoré de Balzac, and Stendhal. They, White (1968b: 49) recorded, "address similar publics, use the same literary genres . . . and employ similar stylistic devices." In other words, according to White, Walter Scott's novel, *Rob Roy*, should be seen in the same light as a conventional narrative history of life in the Scottish Highlands at the time of the Jacobite rising of 1745. This is an argument that has some merit, even if White overstates his case. In my chapter on pre-revolutionary Russia in this *Palgrave Handbook of Management History*, for example, I (► Chap. 49, "Work and Society in the Orthodox East: Byzantium and Russia, AD 450–1861") repeatedly refer to the novels of Leo Tolstoy, Ivan Turgenyev, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky so as to describe not only the intellectual climate of Tsarist Russia but also, more importantly, the lived conditions of the Russian peasantry during the nineteenth century. While giving credence to these accounts, however, I do *not* treat them – as White would have us do – in the same way as I would a historical account, built upon documentary sources such as diaries, tax

records, and contemporary descriptions of observed reality. For while Tolstoy's account of farm management in *Anna Karenina* is undoubtedly *based* upon observed experiences, I nevertheless understand that it is a work of fiction, recording the lives of imaginary rather than historical entities and beings.

If his suggestion that there is more than a passing resemblance between historical narrative and the historical novel has merit, White's other main argument in the collection of essays in honor of Bossenbrook – that conventional history, what he referred to as “historicism,” is inferior to both literary “realism” and “romanticism” – is more controversial. Exploring a theme that he returned to constantly over his career, White contended that the professionalization of history (i.e., “historicism”) was a peculiar and unfortunate attribute of post-Enlightenment Europe, largely attributable to the German theorists, Hegel and Leopold van Ranke. In White's estimation, “historicists” (i.e., professional historians) suffer from two irredeemable faults. First, White (1968b: 53) lamented, “like Vico, the historicist” believes that humanity is “condemned to society in the same way that they are condemned to history.” In other words, “historicists” depict individuals not as free agents but as products of their society. The “historicists” second sin, related to the first, is found in the assumption that a study of “social institutions” is of greater value than inspirational narratives that emphasize “free expression” and “individual will” (White 1968b: 55–56). By contrast, White (1968b: 54) also suggested “realist” and “romantic” accounts were of use precisely because they contradicted the core assumptions of the “historicist,” pointing to the inherently oppressive nature of all social institutions. Accordingly, as “historians” we are better advised to adopt a “romantic” perspective that inspires Nietzschean-like assertions of human will than an “historicist” approach bound by mundane facts about social institutions.

By 1968, it is evident all of the arguments and theoretical positions that were to characterize White's work – that conventional forms of history need to be demolished, that historical narratives should aspire to be works of literature capable of inspiring transformative change, and that history is better organized on the basis of metaphor rather than of fact – were already fully developed. What was missing from his theoretical positions was not so much a lack of internal cohesion as the absence of a mass readership for his ideas.

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## Hayden White, 1973–2018

In an editorial introduction penned in 1998, Brian Fay (1998: 2) dated “the so-called linguistic turn” in history from the publication of White's *Metahistory* in 1973. With this work, Fay (1998: 1) proclaimed, “an entire generation of historians was educated to theory and metatheory in a way no previous generation was.” As a result, Fay (1998: 2) continued, “the topics of narration and representation replaced . . . explanation” as “the central concern” of new age historians. In a separate assessment, Richard Vann (1998: 22), the editor of *History and Theory* and White's colleague at the Wesleyan University, declared that “The publication in 1973 of

Hayden White's *Metahistory* . . . marked a decisive turn in philosophical thinking about history."

In essence, White's *Metahistory* is two books. The larger part, comprising chapters 2–10 (pp. 81–425), is an extended literature review that begins with Hegel and ends with Croce, White's philosophical hero. The second and much shorter part – covering the preface (pp. 9–12), the introduction, and chapter 1 (pp. 13–80) – represents an expansion of the theoretical and stylistic points that White had previously outlined in "The Burden of History" and "Romanticism, Historicism, and Realism." In summing up the larger part of *Metahistory*, Paul (2011: 60–61) accurately describes it as an account of "good guys and bad guys," of "heroes and villains." Heading up the list of villains are Hegel and, more particularly, Ranke. In comparing Ranke's professional histories unfavorably to Walter Scott's "novels of romance," White (1973b: 163, 174) declares that "repudiation of Romanticism was the basis of Ranke's realistic historiography," a failing that made Ranke – and, by implication, all other conventional historians – an inherently "conservative" ideologue, supposedly opposed to "new forms of community in which men might be . . . freed of the restrictions placed upon." Among the "heroes" of *Metahistory*, Nietzsche is much lauded, given pride of place behind Croce. "In historical thought," White (1973b: 331) recorded, "Friedrich Nietzsche marked a turning point, for he . . . denied the reality of any such thing as a historical process." In doing so, White (1973b: 332, 371) continued, Nietzsche not only destroyed "belief in a historical past"; he also created "a second *illusionary* world," a world "in which the weak vie with the strong for the authority to determine how this second world will be characterized."

As White himself understood, typically few readers of *Metahistory* get passed the preface (4 pages) and the introduction (42 pages). For those who do, White's summation of nineteenth-century philosophical positions is dubious in the extreme. As the German critic, Patrick Bahners observed, virtually every point that White made at one place in his book is contradicted by a statement provided elsewhere (cited Paul 2011:7). At times, his assessments can only be regarded as willful distortion. Nietzsche, for example, was never an advocate for the "weak." His concern, instead, was with the "strong," declaring at various times that "men are not equal" (Nietzsche 1883/1970: 124), that the "working classes . . . are unintelligent," that mass of humanity represents "the lowest clay and loam layers of society" (Nietzsche 1874: 39–40), and that the advance of civilization has fatally weakened "the 'blond beast' that existed among Teutonic society prior to Christianity" (Nietzsche 1889/1990: 67).

If White's intellectual reputation rests on the introductory and concluding sections of *Metahistory* rather than the main body of the book, it is also fair to say that even these sections are – preface and conclusion aside – characterized by a convoluted literary style and complex arguments. In terms of substantive argument, White reiterated three main points. First and most importantly, White (1973b: 433) argued that by liberating humanity from the bonds of a historical past constructed around explanatory laws (i.e., economics, politics, religion, etc.), "we are free to conceive 'history' as we please, just as we are free to make of it what we will." In other words,

both the historical past and the lived present can be what we imagine and will them to be. In pursuing this extreme voluntarist position, White (1973b: 1–2) advanced his second key argument: that the “character of historical representation” is inherently “fictive” and that it is *always* more a product of literary imagination than historical “fact.” Upon this intellectual platform, White (1973b: 434) progressed to his third main proposition: that the historian should direct their efforts toward the liberation of the creative imagination,” a process that necessarily entailed the historian’s “own moral and aesthetic aspirations” – constructed around “a poetic and moral level of awareness” – taking precedence over other considerations.

While the propositions that White advanced in *Metahistory* represented a radical attack on established historical conventions, his ideas were nevertheless hardly original. As White’s own book made clear, identical positions had previously been advocated by both Nietzsche and Croce. What was original about White’s book was not so much his idealist and voluntarist understanding of history and its uses but rather the stylistic and literary suggestions that he put forward in order to achieve what Paul (2011) refers to as his “liberation historiography.”

In making literary style rather than the collation of verifiable evidence the central task of the historian, White (1973b: x) identified “three kinds of strategy that can be used by historians to gain . . . ‘explanatory effect’.” In staking out an “ideological” position, White (1973b: x) declared that historians inevitably ascribe to “the tactics” of either anarchism, conservatism, radicalism, or liberalism. “For arguments,” White suggested, “there are modes of Formism, Organicism, Mechanism and Contextualism.” Far more significant that these two “strategies,” however, was the “archetype” in which narratives were “emplotted.” On this front, White (1973b: x) detected four modes of “emplotment,” these being “Romance, Comedy, Tragedy, and Satire.” In other words, in “emplotting” their account, the historian needed to think of their story as if it was a Shakespearean play, rather than as a traditional factual narrative. Beyond these three strategies, White (1973b: x) claimed to detect something even more profound about the way history is written, advising the reader that he “had been forced to postulate a deep level of consciousness on which a historical thinker chooses conceptual strategies.” Declaring that he was following “a tradition of interpretation . . . recently developed by Vico, [and unnamed] modern linguists, and literary theorists,” White (1973b: x) opted to “call these types of prefiguration by the names of the four tropes of poetic language: Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche, and Irony.”

White’s complex formulations inevitably raise two issues: one relating to attribution and the other to meaning. In terms of attribution, the preface of *Metahistory* is devoid of references. The conclusion to *Metahistory* is similarly unreferenced. Even the introduction and Chap. 1 of *Metahistory*, where White expands upon the literary concepts outlined in the preface, are lightly referenced. To the extent that he does provide references, White (1973b: 7–8) attributes his ideas on “emplotment” primarily to the Canadian literary critic, Northrop Frye. In later years, however, White indicated that his understandings of language and meaning were heavily influenced by the French linguist and philosopher, Roland Barthes (Domanska 2008). Certainly, it is hard to believe that White was unaware of the debate about language and power

that transfixed French existentialist and postmodernist circles in the 1960s, given that his article on Foucault ("Foucault Decoded") was published prior to the publication of *Metahistory*. Indeed, as Miller (1993: 133) observes in his study of Foucault, by the late 1950s Barthes was "the oracle of the hour." Through his study, *Mythologies*, in particular, Barthes led the way in emphasizing the overlap between accepted knowledge and mythical understandings, themes that were central to White's arguments in *Metahistory*.

If the "genealogy" of the literary principles outlined in *Metahistory* are by no means clear, the understanding that erstwhile historians take away from a perusal of White's arguments is also unclear. If, for example, we turn to the work of highly accomplished academics who declared themselves followers of White – Frank Ankersmit, Keith Jenkins, Brian Fay, and Alun Munslow – there is little evidence that they paid much heed to White's ideas on historical narrative as "organicism," "synecdoche," and "satire." Instead, what critical or postmodernist historians have embraced in White's work is his more *general* epistemological principles: that "facts" are a literary artifact, that "history" is a "fictive" construct of the historian, and that history is only useful when it is part of a "liberation historiography." Certainly these are the themes that appear constantly in postmodernist histories. If we look to Ankersmit (1989: 144, 153, 145), for example, we read that "Style, not content, is the issue," that historical narratives need to bring about "ethical and aesthetic contemplation," and that "historical work" needs to be understood as "art." Similarly, in the writings of Munslow (2015: 136, 134, 135), we read that "Meanings are fictively constructed," that historical narratives "create" reality, and that "History is a substitution for the past." In a similar vein, Jenkins (2008: 67, 68, 70) informs us that "arguments are never true or false," that "history" is necessarily "rhetorical," and that through "countless readings" of the past the present can be "democratized." The lack of historical interest in White's ideas about literary "emplotment" is also suggested by White's own behavior in the years that followed the publication of *Metahistory*. Increasingly he turned his back on history as his ideas on literary emplotment found greater favor among literary theorists. As his onetime colleague, Richard Vann (1998: 148) recorded, "White became much less of a presence in historical circles, regularly preferring to attend Modern Language Association conventions rather than those of the American Historical Association."

For White, 1973 was notable not only for the publication of *Metahistory* but also of his article, "Foucault Decoded." In what remains one of the best assessments of Foucault's work, White readily identified the weaknesses in the French philosopher's work. Of Foucault's *History of Madness*, White (1973a: 38) accurately observed that it was "a rambling discourse," based upon "a very limited body of data." White (1973a: 31) also accurately summed up Foucault's relationship with causal explanations, noting that Foucault rejected "*all* causal explanations, of whatever sort" [emphasis in original]. Despite – or, because of – such problems, White (1973a: 26) also recognized in Foucault a kindred spirit, "an anti-historian historian," someone who wrote history "in order to destroy it." White (1973a: 50) also declared that "Foucault represents a continuation of a tradition of historical thought which originates in Romanticism and which was taken up . . . by Nietzsche in the last

quarter of the nineteenth century.” In associating Foucault with Nietzsche and romanticism, White was issuing his strongest possible endorsement, aligning his own assault on modernity with that of Foucault. At the same time, however, White took the opportunity to distinguish his own work *from* that of Foucault, spending several pages on discussions of Vico, “tropes,” “synecdoche,” and “metonymy,” the meanings of which probably escaped the typical reader.

Intellectually, if not in terms of job progression, 1973 arguably represented White’s career peak. In large part, White’s subsequent publications represented merely a reiteration of points already made in “The Burden of History,” *Metahistory*, and “Foucault Decoded.” White’s subsequent books – *Tropics of Discourse* (1978), *The Content of the Form* (1987), and *The Practical Past* (2014) – were also, as we have previously noted, essentially collections of short essays. In this White was undoubtedly playing to his own literary strengths, which belied his claims to poetic style and romantic beauty. For as his biographer, Herman Paul (2011: 7), notes, White’s “favorite genre” was “not the monograph” – which suffered from reader “inaccessibility” – but the “essay” that lent itself to a “25-page outburst of creativity.”

To the extent that White pursued new historical themes after 1973, it was typically in response to attacks on his work as White’s understanding of “facts,” “truth,” and the “fictive” became mired in two major polemical debate.

The first and most significant of these controversies involved understandings of the Holocaust, a massacre of millions of innocents that belied White’s (1973b: 1–2) belief in “the fictive character of historical reconstruction.” In an article entitled “Is it Possible to Misrepresent the Holocaust” – initially published in *History and Theory* and republished in the edited collection, *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings*, before reappearing in an expanded book form as *Holocaust Representation: Art within the Limits of History* – Berel Lang (1995, 1998, 2000) made a devastating assault on the relativism of White’s historical genre. Putting the matter bluntly, Lang (1995: 89) declared that the issue of the Holocaust allowed the historian little wriggle room: Did they accept its factual existence or not? Extending his assault to the wider issue as to whether or not “historical narratives . . . are unfettered by anything more than the historian’s imagination,” Lang (1995: 89) made the pertinent point that “Most people . . . would be reluctant to concede that whether they existed five minutes ago depends entirely on what historians . . . say about them.” Even prior to Lang’s attack, the issue of the Holocaust caused White professional grief as Carlo Ginzburg – a professor of Italian studies at the University of California, Los Angeles – used a conference on the Holocaust in 1990 to imply that White harbored proto-fascist ideas (Paul 2011: 121). In responding to the issues raised by the Holocaust, White’s long-term colleague and supporter, Hans Kellner, chose to defend the indefensible. In Kellner’s (1998: 237) belief, the Holocaust was simply a rhetorical term, “an imaginative creation, like all historical events.” Yes, Kellner (1998: 237) conceded, various individuals were murdered at places like Babi Yar. But, “no one witnessed the Holocaust,” which was instead “imaginatively constituted.” For his part, White beat a somewhat confused retreat, attempting to defend his lifelong

positions on the rhetorically constructed nature of the historical narrative while conceding a factual existence to the Holocaust, a position that long-term supporters such as Kellner (accurately) perceived as a failure of nerve. In devoting an entire chapter of *The Practical Past* (Chap. 2) to debates about the Holocaust, White (2014: 28–29) confronted the question as to whether the Holocaust was “true” by declaring, “this question . . . is of secondary importance to discourses making reference to the real world . . . cast in a mode other than that of simple declaration.” From this muddled viewpoint, White (2014: 38) concluded that,

My suggestion has been that we cannot establish on the basis of any strictly factual account whether the Holocaust was a new event, a new kind of event, or . . . an event peculiar to our modernity.

Understandably, this “solution” to the debate as to the factual truth of the Holocaust appealed to neither friend nor foe.

Whereas the controversy involving the Holocaust revolved around matters of fact, the second polemic that White found himself enmeshed in was a dispute over myth and its uses. In an article entitled “Hayden White, Traumatic Nationalism, and the Public Role of History,” the Australian-based academic, Dirk Moses (2005: 312–313), acknowledged White “as a harbinger of postmodern literary theory, even its ‘patron saint’, while at the same time lambasting him for being blind as to the adverse impact of his ideas. As Moses (2005: 314) correctly surmised, “White thinks that national or ethnic mythologies are a legitimate use of the past insofar as they are an answer to the burden of history.” The problem, Moses noted, was that mythology was used by various ethnic groups to justify their historical standing vis-à-vis other religious or political communities. Pointing to recent experiences in Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, Moses (2005: 314–315) noted the “unspeakable atrocities” committed by “ethnic groups and nationalizing states in thrall to traumatic memories” and myths. White’s response to this intellectual assault was in many ways even more unconvincing than that made in relation to the Holocaust controversy. In a reply to Moses published in *History and Theory*, White (2005a: 333) simply observed that “we have different notions about the nature of historical discourse and the uses to which historical knowledge can properly be put.” Having made this all too obvious point, White (2005a: 333) then simply proceeded to restate his well-established belief that “history is a place of fantasy,” unlike the past, which he dismissed as “the realm of the dead.”

In many ways, Moses’s denunciation of White’s ideas on history and mythology was unwarranted, a case of a critical historian being more virtuous than the virtuous White. Hayden White can hardly be blamed for the savage civil wars that occurred in the Balkans and the Middle East during the opening years of the twenty-first century. It is, after all, highly unlikely that many members of the Kurdish *Peshmerga* or the Kosovo Liberation Front were inspired to take up arms by their reading of *Meta-history*. There is, nevertheless, more than a grain of truth in Moses’s critique of White’s work. As Lang (1995: 85) noted, there is little to be gained by those who take activist positions in historical discourse and metaphysical debates “burying their

heads in the sand” when people take unfortunate conclusions from the messages that are conveyed. For, as White himself constantly emphasized, it is through understandings of history that cultures obtain their sense of identity. If these are based on myth, on “fantasy,” rather than a sense of reality, it is more likely that adverse consequences will follow rather than any beneficial outcome.

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## Hayden White’s Influence in Management History

Among historians, Hayden White remains a deeply divisive figure. The strength of these divisions is indicated in a tale recounted by Roy Suddaby, a former editor of *Academy of Management Review* and current program chair of the Management History Division (MHD) of the Academy of Management. During his time as *Academy of Management Review* editor, Suddaby remembers how he made the “naïve error” of favorably citing Hayden White before an American business historians’ conference. “The crowd seethed” to such an extent, Suddaby (2016: 47) recalls, that he feared the use of “pitchforks.” That so many people would be irate at mention of White’s name points to the continued opposition to his ideas among “traditional” historians. Conversely, the fact that the editor of *Academy of Management Review* – arguably the most prestigious journal in management academia – would sing White’s praises highlights the continuing influence of his ideas.

As someone who served as an executive member of the MHD between 2013 and 2018, and who has also had the privilege of being the editor in chief of the *Journal of Management History* since 2015, it is evident to me that White’s influence within management history has never been higher than it is today.

The extraordinary reach of White’s formulations is evidenced in the 2014 article by Rowlinson et al. (2014: 151, 157) in *Academy of Management Review* entitled “Research strategies for organizational history.” This article not only begins by acknowledging White as “a leading philosopher of history,” it also declares acceptance of his view “that there is a “literary” or “fictive” element in all historical . . . and scientific writing.” In a subsequent article in *Academy of Management Review*, entitled “What is Organizational History? Toward a Creative Synthesis of History and Organization Studies,” Godfrey et al. (2016: 599) echo similar themes, declaring “history” to be “a malleable substance that actors mould and shape to justify their actions.” In his *History of History*, the influential British historian and founding coeditor of *Rethinking History*, Alun Munslow (2012: 8), also declared history to be “a fictive construction . . . the construction of the historian” [emphasis in the original]. In her review of recent debates in management and organizational history, the *amodernist* historian Gabrielle Durepos (2015: 153) ranks White alongside Foucault in terms of his importance in shaping “the modern versus postmodern debate by contributing to the development of postmodern historiography.” In the inaugural editorial of *Management & Organizational History*, Charles Booth and Michael Rowlinson (2006: 10) also ranked White alongside Foucault in terms of the “philosophy of history and historical theorists” that they saw their newly established journal engaging with. White’s concepts have also been seminal to the growing



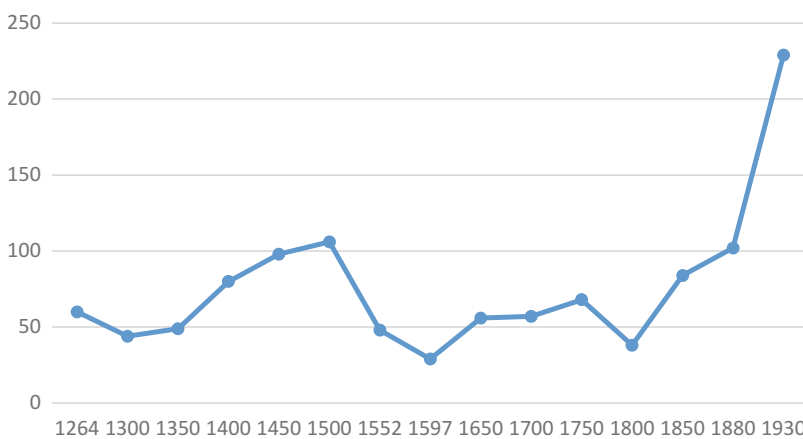
postmodernist displacement of the “scientific attitude” by the so-called “rhetorical attitude” or what Alvesson and Kärreman (2000: 144–145) refer to as “grounded fictionalism.” Associated with the “linguistic” or “discursive” turn in the social sciences, the “Rhetorical Attitude” perceives all knowledge as essentially ideology, mere devices for both maintaining and challenging power (see, e.g., Suddaby and Greenwood 2005).

What explains the steady advance of postmodernist ideas, inspired in large part by Hayden White, within management history? In part, I suggest, this advance can be explained by the fact that the long-dominant traditions within management history – and within the MHD in particular – were always vulnerable targets. As I (► Chap. 1, “Management History in the Modern World: An Overview”) indicate in the general introduction to this *Palgrave Handbook of Management History*, the MHD what I refer to as the George-Wren-Greenwood-Bedeian tradition; a school of thought that was positivist in orientation, supportive of free market capitalism in terms of ideology and dedicated to understanding the impact of changing patterns of management thought (George 1968/1972; Wren and Bedeian 1972/2017). Within this tradition, Dan Wren (University of Oklahoma) and Art Bedeian (Louisiana State University), were particularly influential. Concerned with sound scholarship and the rigorous training of their many students of management history, Wren and Bedeian – and their legion of graduates – paid much heed to intellectual history but little attention to abstract matters relating to ontology, epistemology and philosophy. Accordingly, when the postmodernist challenge arrived at the MHD’s door, those located within the George-Wren-Greenwood-Bedeian tradition were ill-prepared for a defense. Some of Wren and Bedeian’s former students defected, finding the “critical” abstractions of Foucault and White to their liking. Prominent among these defectors were Milorad Novicevic and Shawn Carraher, both former MHD chairs. In a co-authored study entitled “Decentering Wren’s *Evolution of Management Thought*,” both participated in a repudiation of the dominant George-Wren-Greenwood-Bedeian tradition, declaring that “our decentered examination of Wren’s *Evolution of Management Thought* posits that this book should be viewed as a historical platform, rather than as a foundation of historical knowledge” (Novicevic et al. 2015: 27). Among those who steeped in the George-Wren-Greenwood-Bedeian tradition, only my fellow editor, Jeffrey Muldoon, has bothered to undertake the serious study of postmodernist ideas and principles that is a prerequisite for any counter-attack (see Muldoon 2019).

As with most postmodernists, White was wont to depict industrial capitalism and its associated systems of management as nothing but a catastrophe, a blight from which the typical citizen of the world gained nothing, could hope for nothing. In an interview in 2012, for example, White declared that:

For me, the “history” of the world, or global history, is the story of the rise and expansion of an economic system which, in its very development, functions as a cancer on the human and earthly corpus which it purports to nourish by producing “wealth” out of “nothing.” The exposure of this cancer is an ethical duty for any scholar. I would hope that historians would see their profession in this way. (Cited Sklokin 2012)

Like the reality of the Holocaust, White's comments on the achievements of capitalism and management cannot be resolved through reference to one or more texts, a process that typically ends in a circle of claim and counterclaim. Rather, it is best considered by looking to evidence not intended as a "narrative discourse" of the past. As we discussed in previous chapters, a particularly useful source in this regard are the long-term records on European consumer prices and wages collated by the International Scientific Committee on Price History. Established in 1929, this committee created an extensive European database, recording the real wage of building workers, both skilled and unskilled, between the thirteenth and twentieth centuries (Cole and Crandall 1964). Of the studies that have emerged from this database, of particular utility is the so-called Phelps Brown and Hopkins (1956: 306) index, which traced the real wage of a skilled building worker from Southern England, measured against a basket of consumables. As is evident in Fig. 1 – which summarizes the results of this index for the period 1264 to 1930 (1447 representing 100 in the index) – it is evident that the only sustained improvement in living standards prior to the Industrial Revolution was associated with the Black Death, the bubonic plague outbreak of the fourteenth century that left survivors with a surfeit of arable land. With the managerial and technological revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, the living circumstances of the typical worker were fundamentally transformed for the better. Nor was it the case that these economic advances came, as White (1968b: 52, 55) suggested, at the expense of the individual, of freedom and free expression. Rather the reverse was true. Everywhere, the Western form of liberal, industrial capitalism was associated with increased literacy, democracy, the protection of children, and increased opportunities for society's female members. In short, whereas White (2005a: 333) associated the "liberation historiography" that he advocated with "history" as "a place of fantasy," a management historian can justly point to real achievements and a fundamental transformation in the human condition.



**Fig. 1** Real wage of skilled building worker in Southern England, 1264–1930 (1447 = 100). (Source: Phelps Brown and Hopkins: "Seven centuries of . . . builders' wage rates," Appendix B)

## Conclusion

Hayden White enjoyed a fortunate life. Hailing from a Detroit working-class family, White joined the navy too late to see combat service in World War II but early enough to qualify for a postwar veteran's scholarship to university. Inspired to study medieval history while at Detroit's Wayne State University, White's doctoral studies at the University of Michigan benefited from a Fulbright fellowship that funded a long period of study in Italy. Falling under the influence of Carlo Antoni – a disciple of the Italian idealist philosopher and onetime fascist supporter, Benedetto Croce – White became expert in ideas that appeared novel in an American context. Having adopted the esoteric philosophical principles of Croce, with their emphasis on individualism and extreme voluntarism, White's ideas found unexpected favor with a mass audience during the late 1960s and early 1970s, a time when a disgruntled but highly educated younger generation felt alienated from society's dominant ideologies and institutions. As such, White's career paralleled that of publicly better known French postmodernists such as Foucault and Derrida but was nevertheless distinct from them. Whereas Foucault, Derrida, and the other French postmodernists invariably looked to German philosophical idealism for inspiration, White came to his conclusions by a separate and independent route.

Like Foucault and, more particularly, Derrida, White made the interrelationship between language and knowledge the key to his unique brand of historiography, (in)famously declaring that there is always a "fictive character" to "historical reconstruction" (White 1973b: 1–2). For White, history was "a place of fantasy" and "historical representation . . . all story, no plot, no explanation, no ideological implication at all – that is to say, 'myth'" (White 2005a: 372–373). As such, historians do not "record" history. Rather they "do" history, creating a new, imaginary world. In doing so, White (1973b: xii) advised in *Metahistory*, a historian needed to give "aesthetic and moral" concerns a greater weight than matters relating to evidence. Drawing on Giambattista Vico and Roland Barthes, White (2005b: 147) also argued that greater meaning was to be had from narratives that inspired the imagination that in those that boasted a spurious claim to "objectivity." For, White (2005b: 147) continued, the "real" should be perceived as far more than "the true," embracing in addition "the possible or imaginable." Like Foucault and, more particularly, Derrida, White (1968b: 55) regarded not just industrial capitalism but the entire social structure of the West as a blight, condemning "social institutions, ideas, and values as barriers to be overcome, bastions against the free expression of nature and individual human will."

Like Foucault and Derrida, White's work was Eurocentric in nature. Yes, it is true, White (1973b: 2) condemned as "a specifically Western prejudice . . . the presumed superiority of modern, industrial society" vis-à-vis other societies. Nevertheless, White's intellectual framework is one that only has meaning within a Eurocentric culture. It not only draws on complex traditions of Western idealist thought, it also primarily speaks to a highly educated Western intelligentsia with its talk of the "fictive" and literary "emplotment" around metaphor and literary tropes such as metonymy and synecdoche. As Waldman (1981: 791) accurately noted, the

“distinctions” that White made between “historical and fictional narrative” were also ones that drew “from essentially Eurocentric research.” It is also the case that if White had of published *Metahistory* in 2020 rather than 1973 he would have received brickbats rather than bouquets, condemned for an excessive interest in the philosophies of 8 dead, white males.

Much lauded, White’s historiography, and the genre of historical narrative that it inspired, suffers from three interrelated problems. First, as we noted in the previous section, White treated all evidence as if it were narrative, a textual discourse on the past. Across a publishing career of more than half a century, White never paid any great heed to those sources of evidence that are – or should be – the lifeblood of a management historian: production output, transportation records, tax accounts, census figures, labor participation, and employment data. White’s second failing, related to the first, is found in his myopic understanding of history. For White, history revolved around the “event,” the specific historical experience that is supposedly the product of individual acts of consciousness and will. Given the supposedly unique nature of every event, White’s methodology rules out any understanding of history as a product of decades and even centuries of accretion, in which each generation builds upon – and is shaped – by the effort of those who came before. As White (2006: 29) expressed it late in his career, “the knowledge with which history provides us is so situation-specific as to be irrelevant to later times and places.” This is a very different – and much narrower – view of history than that advocated by the French historian, Fernand Braudel (1946/1975: 21), who dismissed “the history of events” as “surface disturbances, crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong back.” Like it or not, we are all products of our history, a past that both empowers and limits the goals and aspirations of our own time. Together, White’s myopic understanding of history and evidence resulted in a third failing: he never evinced much appreciation of the material achievements of the society that allowed him such a fortunate life. Instead, White increasingly advocated a Marxist condemnation of capitalism even as the Marxist societies of Europe crumbled into ruin, declaring in 2012:

I view history or rather the course of socio-political development in the West from Rome to the present from a Marxist perspective, and my criticism of the historical profession in modern times stems from my conviction that it is part of the Superstructure of a Base dominated by the Capitalist mode of production. (Cited Sklokin 2012)

Finding little to commend in his own society, White instead found favor in the circumstances of Chinese communism, observing: “In my recent visits to China I was much struck by the ways in which Chinese intellectuals, including historians and social scientists, were trying to combine Maoist with Confucianist principles for the creation of a socially and political responsible knowledge” (cited Sklokin 2012). Such praise for a totalitarian regime, where dissent continues to be brutally suppressed, did White no credit.

In short, if we look to the stated goals of Hayden White’s work, we are struck by the gulf between goals and the means of achieving those goals. Constantly, White spoke of broadening the historical imagination while advocating a myopic view of

the historical process. Across his long career, he constantly spoke of individual freedom and will while showing a strange reluctance to condemn the very real threats to freedom from totalitarian societies. Declaring himself an opponent of European ethnocentric, White's whole genre was itself deeply ethnocentric. None of these intellectual contradictions, however, denied him a fortunate life.

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## Cross-References

- ▶ [Foundations: The Roots of Idealist and Romantic Opposition to Capitalism and Management](#)
- ▶ [Management History in the Modern World: An Overview](#)
- ▶ [Paul-Michel Foucault: Prophet and Paradox](#)
- ▶ [The Intellectual Origins of Postmodernism](#)
- ▶ [What Is Management?](#)

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