

PRÁTICAS DA
HISTÓRIA

JOURNAL ON THEORY, HISTORIOGRAPHY,
AND USES OF THE PAST

Nº 6 - 2018



Número especial **A História de Hayden White**
Special issue **The History of Hayden White**

A burden that is still heavy

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Práticas da História, n.º 6 (2018): 23-30

www.praticasdahistoria.pt

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It may be no exaggeration to say that Hayden White's best-known writing after *Metahistory* is the essay "The Burden of History," first published in 1966 in the journal *History and Theory*. According to Robert Doran, this article became "a kind of clarion call for a revolution in historical studies" – a revolution that never arrived but did not lose its meaning. The purpose of this brief article is to present Hayden White's critique of historiography in this text and to make some considerations about its meaning and scope.

Keywords: Hayden White, "The Burden of History", Historiographical critique.

Um fardo ainda pesado

Depois de *Meta-história*, talvez não seja exagero dizer que o texto mais conhecido de Hayden White seja o ensaio "O fardo da história", publicado pela primeira vez em 1966 na revista *History and Theory*. De acordo com Robert Doran, esse artigo tornou-se "uma espécie de clarim a chamar por uma revolução nos estudos históricos" – uma revolução que não veio, mas nem por isso perdeu o sentido. O propósito deste breve artigo é apresentar a crítica à historiografia feita por Hayden White nesse texto e tecer algumas considerações acerca de seu significado e alcance.

Palavras-chave: Hayden White, "O fardo da História", Crítica historiográfica.

A burden that is still heavy

Fábio Franzini*

Boy, you're gonna carry that weight

Carry that weight for a long time

(Lennon & McCartney, 1969)

Originally published in 1966 in the *History and Theory* journal, and later reedited in 1978's *Tropics of Discourse*,¹ the essay “The Burden of History” is based on the open, explicit, and, above all, radical questioning of the meaning and legitimacy of the knowledge produced by historians since the mid-nineteenth century. For Hayden White, if the period between 1800 and 1850 was the “history’s golden age”, a time when intellectuals were able to combine science and art to bring understanding to the *present* time, what followed was the crystallizing of the discipline into a comfortable “epistemologically neutral middle ground that supposedly exists between art and science”.² As made clear by the way the twentieth-century progressed, however, this stance was not only based on a mistake – the assumption that such a ground *exists* – but it also shed light on how outdated historians had become, clinging

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1 Hayden White, “The Burden of History,” *History and Theory* 5, no. 2 (1966): 111-34; Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse. Essays on Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 27-50. To elaborate this article, I used the Brazilian edition, cross-checking the translation with the original text: Hayden White, *Trópicos do Discurso. Ensaios sobre a Crítica da Cultura*, trad. Alípio Correia de Franca Neto (São Paulo: Edusp, 1994), 39-63.

2 Hayden White, “The Burden of History,” 132; *idem*, 111, *passim*.

to “a combination of *romantic* art on the one hand and of *positivistic* science on the other”.³ By extension, the history written by historians was also outdated, limited, and unsatisfactory to those who were most sensitive and attentive to changes in the world.

Committed to the search for the “truth” about what one day happened and the “objective” narrative of such event, the historian moved away from an understanding of his own time while imposing on contemporary society the result of his diligent work. The result was none other than the description of a “perfect” past, well resolved in itself and endowed with a “sense” that the present should assume and carry on. Thus revealed, history had a weight: the overpowering, overwhelming weight of the “awareness of the past,” from which, at least apparently, there was no escape. Following the path opened by modern science and, especially, by modern art, Hayden White denounces the paralyzing character of this *burden* and strives to show that yes, it is possible to free oneself, as long as historians renounce their own weight and (re) establish “the value of the study of the past, not as ‘an end in itself’, but as a way of providing perspectives on the present that contribute to the solution of problems peculiar to our own time”.⁴

What the essay expresses, in short, is a profound discomfort with the conservatism of academic historiography and its inability to attribute meaning to the experiences of modern individuals and the modern world. And, although his readers would certainly be appalled by such sentences as “history, as currently conceived, is a kind of historical accident”, or “the conventional historian’s conceptions of history are at once a symptom and a cause of a potentially fatal cultural illness”, they merely translated something the author had long thought. As Herman Paul points out, similar questions had been posed by White in the

³ *Idem*, 126.

⁴ *Idem*, 125. According to Herman Paul, “the title of White’s essay appears ambiguous. On the one hand, there is the ‘substantive burden imposed upon the present by the past in the form of outmoded institutions, ideas, and values’ – an echo of White’s imperative that the moral order ought to adapt itself to the technical order – ‘but also *the way of looking at the world* which gives to these outmoded forms their specious authority’. On the other, there is the burden, or responsibility, of historians to help their audiences overcome that dictate of a historical world-view”. Herman Paul, *Hayden White* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), chap. 2, Kindle.

first half of the 1960s in two reviews of books suggestively devoted to the writing of history, which led *History and Theory* to invite him to produce a critique of greater breadth.⁵ Richard T. Vann, in turn, notes that White's interest in the philosophy of history, intellectual history, and the history of historiography had been present since the beginning of his career, with some of his texts of the 1950s already presenting acute and unusual formulations about academic historiographical production.⁶

We can, thus, say that, far from being the free reflection of “an obscure professor of medieval history at the University of Rochester”,⁷ “The Burden of History” embodied Hayden White's continuing commitment to thinking about the plurality of forms of representation of the past, always with a view to the possibilities of, once again, liberating the present from the burden of history. It was, in its own way, a piece of *combat pour l'histoire*, a combat now carried out from the American trench and in a significant “transitional moment in twentieth-century intellectual history”, on the eve of what was to become the “poststructuralist explosion,” as Robert Doran says.⁸ Doran also notes, incidentally, that White's text appears in the same year that Michel Foucault's *Les Mots et les Choses* is published;⁹ certainly a coincidence, but a very expressive coincidence of the change of perspective in certain academic circles.

As is often the case with combative writings, the essay has a generalizing tone that does not fail to incur some injustice. Turning his

5 Paul, *Hayden White*, chap. 2. The books reviewed by White were, in the case of the first review, *Approaches to History*, edited by H. P. R. Finberg, and *History: Written and Lived*, by Paul Weiss, published in the *Journal of Modern History* 35 (1963); in the second case, *History*, by John Higham (in collaboration with Leonard Krieger and Felix Gilbert), published in the *AHA Newsletter* 3, no. 5 (1965).

6 Richard T. Vann, “Hayden White, Historian,” in *Re-figuring Hayden White*, ed. Frank Ankersmit, Ewa Domańska, and Hans Kellner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 305-6.

7 Robert Doran, “Choosing the Past: Hayden White and the Philosophy of History,” in *Philosophy of History After Hayden White*, ed. Robert Doran (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), Editor's Introduction, Kindle.

8 “One has to keep in mind that White wrote ‘The Burden of History’ during a transitional moment in twentieth-century intellectual history: a few years after Thomas Kuhn's seminal text [*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1962] appeared but a few years before the poststructuralist explosion with White, rightly or wrongly, would come to be identified”. *Idem, ibidem*.

9 *Idem, ibidem*.

batteries on “the historians,” White seems to ignore the fact that at that time not every historian was “conventional” – or, in other words, not every history was *thought of* in the same way. In 1961, for example, Edward Hallet Carr, in his famous book *What Is History*, made a definite critique of the “almost mystical belief” that the profession was harbored by “objectivity and supremacy of historical facts,” among other considerations that generated discomfort at the time.¹⁰ Decades earlier, in 1929, Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, in the *Annales*’ first editorial, claimed to be “invested in producing a divorce with the traditional,” by means of approximations between the past and the present and rejection of the “fearful schemes” of the study of history.¹¹ Even further back in time, James Harvey Robinson, in 1912, was certain of the dawning of a “new history,” which, “escaping from the limitations formerly imposed upon the study of the past,” would soon “consciously [...] meet our daily needs,” including the use of “all of those discoveries that are being made about mankind by anthropologists, economists, psychologists, and sociologists.” For Robinson, even if the “intelligent public” continued “to accept somewhat archaic ideas of the scope and character of history,” the discipline would inevitably be involved in the revolution that occurred at the time in the field of knowledge.¹²

Certainly, these are sparse examples and of very different origin and purpose with respect to the proposal of “The Burden of History”. Yet they can, to a certain extent, thicken the chorus of White’s “revolt against history in modern writing” from literature, making us realize that *also* among historians this revolt was not exactly new. And,

10 David Harlan, “‘The Burden of History’ Forty Years Later,” in *Re-figuring Hayden White*, ed. Frank Ankersmit, Ewa Domańska, and Hans Kellner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 171. Harlan also discusses, in the sequence of his text, Michael Oakeshott’s furious reaction to Carr’s book and the counterpoint offered by White with “The Burden of History”. *Idem*, 173-77.

11 Les Directeurs, “A Nos Lecteurs,” *Annales d’Histoire Économique et Sociale*, no. 1 (15 January 1929): 1-2. As is known Febvre is also the author of *Combats pour l’Histoire* (1953). About Bloch, Claudio Fogu traces the intriguing relations between the classic *Apologie pour l’Histoire* and the critique presented in “The Burden of History”. Claudio Fogu, “Figurando Hayden White na modernidade,” in *Do Passado Histórico ao Passado Prático: 40 Anos de Meta-história*, ed. Julio Bentivoglio e Verónica Tozzi (Serra: Milfontes, 2017), 87-95.

12 James Harvey Robinson, *The New History* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), 24-25.

contrary to what may seem, this does not diminish the power of his critique, but rather empowers it: a not only “modern” but above all *modernist* historiography was much more urgent than it seemed. A historiography which, considering the metaphor as “*the heuristic rule which self-consciously eliminates certain kind of data from consideration as evidence,*” would have in the historian an agent who, “like the modern artist and scientist, seeks to explore a certain perspective on the world that does not pretend to exhaust description or analysis of all of the data in the phenomenal field but rather offers itself as *one way among many* of disclosing certain aspects of the field”.¹³

We must recall that all this was written in 1966, and we all know how historiography, in its hegemonic form of production, remains distant from such stylistic perspectivism. So, instead of dwelling on that point, however relevant it may be,¹⁴ and commenting on what we should do about it, it may be worthwhile to call into question *who we are*, based on the portrait painted by White himself:

“After all, historians have conventionally maintained that neither a specific methodology nor a special intellectual equipment is required for the study of history. What is usually called the ‘training’ of the historian consists for the most part of study in a few languages, journeyman work in archives, and the performance of a few set exercises to acquaint him with standard reference works and journals in his field. For the rest, a general experience of human affairs, reading in peripheral fields, self-discipline, and *Sitzfleisch* are all that are necessary. Anyone can master the requirements fairly easily. How can it be said then that the

13 White, “The Burden of History,” 130. According to Claudio Fogu, “The Burden of History” is the starting point of the *modern historiography theory* developed by White, which would permeate throughout all of his work. Fogu, “Figurando Hayden White na modernidade”, 73-81.

14 With this respect, see Harlan’s analyses, “‘The Burden of History’ Forty Years Later,” and Richard T. Vann, “Hayden White and Non-Non-Histories,” in *Philosophy of History After Hayden White*, chap. 9, Kindle.

professional historian is peculiarly qualified to define the questions which one may ask of the historical record and is alone able to determine when adequate answers to the questions thus posed have been given?"¹⁵

More than half a century later, it is, or should be, rather embarrassing to recognize that these words remain valid. We must also acknowledge that, today, they have a very sensitive implication: with technology favoring and facilitating, at one end, access to the "past" and, at the other, the dissemination of *anything* that is elaborated about it, the professional historian seems to become, increasingly, a dispensable intermediary in the production of historical knowledge – at least when considering the knowledge which draws attention to social life in its preoccupations with the "practical" past.¹⁶ Now, in fact, "anyone" can "be a historian," and this is not necessarily good: as White emphasized, and never failed to point out, the task of freeing the present from the burden of history can only be fully achieved if it is carried out with ethical and moral responsibility; otherwise, the (false) sense of freedom will only place us in other cages. This responsibility is what qualifies us, as historians, to ask and answer about the past. More than ever, affirming this is our challenge.

¹⁵ White, "The Burden of History," 124.

¹⁶ Cf. Hayden White, *The Practical Past* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014).

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Referência para citação:

Franzini, Fábio. "A burden that is still heavy." *Práticas da História, Journal on Theory, Historiography and Uses of the Past*, n.º 6 (2018): 23-30.