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This article investigates Hayden White's use of the concept of the practical past, borrowed from Michael Oakeshott, as a means to argue for individual choices --ethical, moral and existential-- in contemporary life, and hence as a way to escape the burden of history, a problem that had motivated White's examination of historiographical practice from the beginning of his career as a historian. Thus for White, the practical past, in allowing the individual to choose one's past in order to choose one's present, also had the ultimately Utopian goal of shaping not only the present but the future as well.

Palavras-chave: The Practical past; the Historical Past, The Burden of History.

O Regresso ao Passado de Hayden White como Fonte de Prática Humana

Este artigo investiga o uso que Hayden White faz do conceito de passado prático, inspirado por Michael Oakeshott, como forma de argumentar em favor das escolhas individuais – éticas, morais e existenciais – na vida contemporânea e, conseqüentemente, como forma de escapar ao fardo do passado, um problema que motivou a análise que White fez da prática historiográfica desde o início da sua carreira como historiador. Neste sentido, para White, ao permitir ao indivíduo escolher o seu passado para que possa escolher o seu presente, o passado prático tem também o objetivo utópico de moldar não só o presente, mas também o futuro.

Keywords: Passado Prático; Passado Histórico; Fardo da História.

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In light of Hayden White's lifelong critique of professional historians' claims to transparent veracity in the depiction of the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, it is hardly surprising that towards the end of his life he advocated, instead, for what he called "the practical past" in place of the "historical past." This "practical past" White defined as the past of "particular persons, groups, institutions and agencies –that is to say, the past that individuals or members of groups draw upon in order to help them make assessments and make decisions in ordinary everyday life as well as in extreme situations (such as catastrophes, disasters, battles, judicial and other kinds of conflicts in which survival is at issue)."¹ In espousing the notion of a "practical past," in place of the "historical past," White was drawing on the distinction between these approaches to history first articulated by Michael Oakeshott in the 1930s and revisited by Oakeshott in the early fifties and again in the sixties.² The "practical past" for Oakeshott, as David Harlan has shown, was the past "we create in order to make valid practical beliefs

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¹ Hayden White, *The Practical Past* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2014), Preface, p. xiii. White initially published his article on "The Practical Past", *Historiein* 10 (2010): 10-19.

² Michael Oakeshott, *On History and other Essays*, forward by Timothy Fuller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1999; originally published by Oxford, B. Blackwell, 1985). Essay 1, "Present, Future and Past," 1-48. Notably, for Oakeshott, the "practical past" was a present-future oriented past, which may have been part of its attraction for White, for whom –as will be discussed– the "practical past" had a decidedly Utopian aspect.

about the present and the future, about the world in general.”³ Initially, Oakeshott sharply differentiated between the two and, despite acknowledging the utility of the practical past for moral reflection, upheld the authority of a truly ‘historical past’ as constructed by professional historiography. Yet by 1967, while still maintaining the validity of his original distinction, Oakeshott had become more sympathetic to the potential that the ‘practical past’ had for human life, seeing it as “our primary means of locating ourselves in time, even the condition of all human self-consciousness.”⁴

In many ways, this final phase in White’s thought can be seen as the logical culmination of his earliest writing and, in particular, of his desire to escape “the burden of history”, or at least history as traditionally understood as the precursor and, in fundamental ways, the determination of the present. In place of the Rankean, positivist notion of continuity, White, in his article on “The Burden of History,” already in 1966 claimed that historians must acknowledge rupture and discontinuity as man’s lot,⁵ particularly in light of the disenchantment of a world without secure religious or metaphysical tenets. In the absence of metaphysical foundations, history alone could sustain man’s existential issues, but such ethical and moral guidance was no longer provided by traditional historiography. For as White proclaimed in *Metahistory*, the chaotic –or what White called the “sublime”– nature of history “does not make a significant contribution to the problem of understanding human nature in general, for it does not show us anything about man that cannot be learned from the study of living men.”⁶ In some ways, if

3 David Harlan, “The ‘Burden of History’ Forty Years Later,” in *Re-Figuring Hayden White*, eds. Frank Ankersmit, Ewa Domanska, Hans Kellner (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009), 173. See also Chris Lorenz, “It Takes Three to Tango, History Between the ‘Practical’ and the ‘Historical Past,’” *Storia della Storiografia* 65, no. 1 (2014): 29-46. Lorenz explains White’s privileging of the practical past over the historical past in his later years as a defense of its existential priority, especially in light of the consequences of modernist events like the Holocaust and other catastrophes, which are incapable of narrativization and other forms of structuration due to their intrinsic “modernist” nature.

4 *Ibid.*, 174.

5 Hayden White, “The Burden of History,” *History and Theory* 5, no. 2 (1966): 134.

6 Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 57.

one considers “The Burden of History” and “The Practical Past” as the framing articles of White’s career, then *Metahistory*, with its undermining of the truth claims of traditional historiography, can be seen as the instrument chosen by White to liberate humankind from the tyranny of the (positivist) past. Hence his emphasis on rhetoric (and narratology), which he construed as “a theory of composition by which a certain body of information was worked up for different practical uses, persuasion, incitement to action, inspiration of feeling of reverence or repulsion.”⁷ And for White, this was a return to history’s original conception from the time of Herodotus and Thucydides, for whom history functioned as a “pedagogical and practical discipline *par excellence*.”⁸

As White argued in an exchange with Dirk Moses, whatever the source of the individual’s knowledge of the past on which to shape a desired future, it will not come from within professional historiography, but rather history as offered in the “practical past.” White’s evident belief here that history alone, given the disenchantment of a world without secure religious or metaphysical tenets, “offers the individual a basis of judging the present and thus imagining a better future” remains faithful to his position, articulated as early as the ‘Burden of History,’ that “only a chaste historical consciousness can truly challenge the world anew every second, for only history mediates between what is and what men think ought to be with truly humanizing effect.”⁹ The grounds for constructing one’s past as well as one’s future, thus, remain ethical and willed. What the notion of a ‘practical past’ seems to offer White is not only the crucial ability for people to locate themselves in time and hence make history available in a post-metaphysical world, but also access to memory, that which, in Oakeshott’s initial formulations, makes up the fragments and traditions upon which people draw in crafting a practical, hence personal, past.

White’s initial valorization of the “practical past” derived from his analysis of the past as presented in literature, poetry and drama, and

⁷ White, *The Practical Past*, 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁹ White, “The Burden of History,” 134.

especially in the realist novel. For White, the depiction of history in the realist novel “resulted over time in the creation of a past quite different from that which served as the object of professional historians.” This, he proclaimed,

was the practical past of my title, a past which, unlike that of the historians, has been lived by all of us more or less individually and more or less collectively and which serves as the basis for the kinds of perceptions of everyday situations of the kind never experienced by the “heroes” of history.¹⁰

Thus, for White, what an appreciation for and study of the practical past enabled was access to “the ways in which lay persons and practitioners of other disciplines call upon, recall, or seek to use ‘the past’ as a ‘space of experience’ to be drawn upon as a basis for all kinds of judgments and decisions in daily life.”¹¹

In the emphasis on “experience” and the utility of knowledge of the practical past as a guide to personal and collective action, White sought to underline the fundamentally moral and ethical nature of historical knowledge as it pertained to human life, here borrowing from Kant who, as White said, called “practical” contemporary “efforts to answer central questions of moral and social concerns”, that is “what should I (we) do,”¹² or as Lenin might have said, “what is to be done?” In this, as well, White drew a sharp distinction between the “historical past” and the “practical past,” since he averred: “history in its status as a science of or the study of the past purported to purge the study of the past of any **ethical** content.”¹³ What the practical past offered was precisely the ability to choose, for as he repeatedly said: “In choosing

¹⁰ White, *The Practical Past*, 14-15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹² *Ibid.*, 8.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 9.

our past we choose our present.”¹⁴ In the article on “The Public Relevance of Historical Studies A reply to Dirk Moses,” White criticized history not only for its abjuration of ethics, but more profoundly for the fact that “it has sold out any claim to relevance to present existential concerns of the societies in which it is practiced in order to purchase a much more dubious claim to ‘objectivity’ in the study of the past.”¹⁵ Choice, therefore, not the pursuit of some fable of “truth,” lay at the core of the historian’s activity, a choice governed not by epistemological or cognitive goals for knowledge, but by aesthetic and moral aspirations. And behind this view of the historian’s task, as Hans Kellner already argued, lies “the hidden presence of Sartre and Existentialism.”¹⁶

Robert Doran has recently demonstrated that White’s reliance on Sartrean existentialism shaped both the future-oriented character of the historian’s choice i.e. “in choosing our past we choose our future”—and the absolute need to make such choices, for in Sartre’s thought the burden of being itself imposes the *necessity* of doing so. As Doran explains:

Sartre holds that...we are always essentially and inescapably ‘free,’ free to *choose* ourselves but also *obliged* to choose ourselves in every moment for even to refuse to choose is still a choice, and thus passivity is an illusion.¹⁷

For Sartre, although the “the meaning of the past is strictly dependent on my present project... [and] I alone decide at each moment the *bearing* of the past,” transcendence of the past is not tantamount to its denial, since, Sartre insists, “by projecting myself towards my ends, I

14 White, “The Burden of History,” 123.

15 White, “The Public Relevance of Historical Studies. A Reply to Dirk Moses,” *History and Theory* 44 (2005): 336.

16 Hans Kellner, “A Bedrock of Order: Hayden White’s Linguistic Humanism,” *History and Theory* 19 (1980): 17.

17 Robert Doran, “Choosing the Past: Hayden White and the Philosophy of history,” introduction to *Philosophy of History after Hayden White*, ed. Robert Doran. (New York, Bloomsbury: Studies in American Philosophy, 2014), 12.

preserve the past with me, and by action I decide its meaning."¹⁸ White, Doran argues, effectively adopted this existentialist view, "transforming it into a full-blown philosophy of history," for according to this mode we realize our present aspirations "by projecting them backward as well as forward."¹⁹ The voluntarism central to such a use of the past remains faithful to White's existentialist faith, which Hermann Paul has also emphasized.²⁰ Indeed, Peter Novick even refers to White's "existentialist *quasi* obsession with the historian's liberty of choice. It is not too much to call him historiography's philosopher of freedom."²¹

The argument that this existentialist project underlies White's work from the time of his writing "The Burden of History" to the present helps to explain White's continuing focus on the historical "sublime" –understood as the inherently chaotic and meaningless nature of history– a characteristic of human history that had been masked by the nineteenth-century, Rankean pretense that the structure of the historian's narrative was merely a representation of structures already present in the past itself, a claim that, as White was to argue in "The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation,"²² worked to de-sublimate the past by disciplining the historian's imagination, thereby demoting the 'sublime' to the status of the merely 'beautiful'.²³ Hence White's repeated insistence, following Louis Mink, that "stories are not lived, they are told," are invented, not found and that "recognition of the sublime is the only path to changing history."²⁴ White's embrace of the sublime, therefore, was a deeply ethical gesture for, he argued, it represented "the kind of meaninglessness which alone can goad the moral sense of living human beings to make their lives

18 *Ibid.*, 14.

19 *Ibid.*, 15.

20 For a discussion of this principle in White's work, see Herman Paul, *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011).

21 Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: "The Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 601.

22 Hayden White, "The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-sublimation," *Critical Inquiry* 9 (1982): 113-137.

23 *Ibid.*, 122.

24 *Ibid.*, 135.

different for themselves and their children, which is to say, to endow their lives with a meaning for which they alone are fully responsible.”²⁵

In particular, White saw his criticism as a means of liberating modern man from the Irony –in effect, the trope– that dominated modern consciousness and disabled mankind from making precisely the kind of choices implied by the notion of the practical past. For as Moses demonstrated, whether historical processes are constructed (early White) or “real” (the later White) utopianism remains “the dream in the name of which men dared to demand something better than the hand dealt them by generic or social forces.”²⁶ As White himself wrote in “The Future of Utopia in History,” he wished “to challenge the party of history for its repression of the utopian moment in history’s own makeup and for casting it out of any properly historical reflection on history as a residue either of infantile self-indulgence or of senile imbecility.”²⁷ In the end, it is the rejection of the “historical past” in favor of the “practical past” and the embrace of the sublime of history and its freedom to constitute the meaning of the past for the present as a conscious choice concerning a desirable, even utopian, future that situates ethical goals long banished from the practice of professional historiography. Throughout his career and writings, White sought to bend that practice to human needs and aspirations. No one argued more forcefully for an ethically responsible and morally meaningful approach to the past, whose ultimate goal is to lead the historian towards an ethics of historical science.”²⁸

25 *Ibid.*, 128.

26 A. Dirk Moses, “Hayden White, Traumatic Nationalism and the Public Role of History,” *History and Theory* 44 (October, 2005): 319.

27 Hayden White, “The Future of Utopia in History.” *Historiein* 7 (2007): 12.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

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