

Is there such thing as  
a peasant community  
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The concept of 'reality' in historical studies is a contested one: 'history's anxiety now hovers over the status and meaning of the word 'reality''.<sup>1</sup> Much historiography is grounded in 'realist' or 'foundationalist' methodology; that is scholarship that explicitly attempts to reconstruct a past 'reality'. Indeed, history was given 'scientific' status by a number of scholars. Bury's inaugural lecture as Regius Professor at Cambridge reflects this now outdated positivism: history is a 'science' that has particular 'claims' and 'laws'.<sup>2</sup> Historical reality, in this view, is attainable; it can be described and analyzed.

However, the notion of 'reality' has been convincingly challenged by scholars influenced by the linguistic turn.<sup>3</sup> Scholars such as Jenkins and Harlan have adopted the tenants of post-structuralism and have undermined the epistemological and ontological assumptions guarding the concept of 'reality'.<sup>4</sup> History becomes a 'shifting, problematic discourse' unable to make claims of veracity.<sup>5</sup> Scholars such as Jenkins dissolve the distinction between 'historical narrative' and 'fictional narrative' undermining the distinction between 'honest' scholarship and propaganda.

In Chariter's words, 'all capacity to choose between the true and false, to tell what happened, and to denounce falsifications and forgers' is lost.<sup>6</sup> It seems short-sighted and linguistically reductive to wholly reject the notion of 'reality'. Lorenz, for example, drawing on Putnam, advocates 'internal realism'; 'reality' exists within conceptual frameworks.<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, scholars such as Car argue that 'action' is structured according to 'narrative'.<sup>8</sup> Historical analysis simply mirrors this narratively constructed 'reality'.

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It will be argued that attempts such as Lorenz and Carr, while not unproblematic, should be taken seriously, but that Hayden White paradoxically provides a barrier against the excesses of linguistic relativism. . Historians have always generally viewed ' reality' as problematic. Ranke, himself, acknowledged that history, in contrast to other sciences, could not be " satisfied simply with recording what has been found; history requires the ability to recreate". 9 Indeed, Bloch in arguing that ' questions' have to be asked of evidence retains a large role for the creative influence of the historian.

In this respect, a ' critical method' to source analysis allows historical scholarship to exist in a dialectical relationship with ' reality'. In the second half of the twentieth century the critique of ' reconstructionist' history grew louder with the publication of T. Kuhn's, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in which he argued that ' scientific' research was undertaken within theoretical paradigms; rather than being a simple reconstruction of ' reality'. 11 In the field of history, E. H. Carr noted how selection of source material was based on cultural assumptions.

Historical research was viewed as struggling towards a ' reality' impaired by the primary material and cultural biases of the scholars; but Carr simultaneously asserted that history is not ' something spun out of the human brain'. 12 The term ' reality' was still centre-stage in the historians vocabulary, it was however recognised as problematic and impossible to fully reconstruct. The ontological and epistemological assumptions behind the concept of ' reality' have been radically overhauled by the linguistic turn.

Barthes, drawing on Saussurian 'structuralism', suggested that there was no difference between history and fiction.

Reality is dissolved into a literary trope. Indeed, White argues that historical narratives are 'verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences'.<sup>14</sup>

Historical 'narrative' is 'emploted' and imposed, by the historian, on 'reality' to create meaning. Events do not 'speak for themselves' but are suppressed or highlighted 'by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view... in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a play'.

The concept of 'reality' was rejected, in favour, of a multiplicity of literary 'narratives'. In this respect, the 'word' reality was, if not expunged, sidelined in the vocabulary of the historian, in favour for 'narrative' and 'emplotment'. However, scholars such as D. Carr have challenged White's contention that historians impose 'structure' and 'meaning', on reality, through narrative. Carr draws on a number of phenomenological perspectives to argue that narrative is a constitute aspect of human life.

Human reality is structured upon narrative: an isomorphic relationship exists between 'reality' and 'narrative'. Human agents understand experience through a 'protentional-retentional' process, where 'past', 'present' and 'future' are sequenced. Narrative is not imposed on historical reality but drawn from it: narrative inheres 'in the events themselves' and 'is an extension of one of their primary features'.<sup>16</sup> In this respect, the historian

uncovers a narrative structure that is inherent in human activity, rather than using literary devices to superimpose coherence or 'meaning' on reality.

However, simply because narrative is a constitutive part of 'reality' or 'experience' this does not convincingly show that historians do not superimpose literary motifs on 'reality'. Historians construct not the narratives of historical agents but rather narrativise these 'actors' themselves. Historical narratives do not have to correspond to the 'lived' narratives of historical agents. Carr's attempt to make 'narrative forms' consistent with the concept of 'reality', within history studies, is ultimately unconvincing. White's argument, however, has been criticised from a number of other angles.

In particular, the notion of 'trope' and its relationship to 'emplotments', 'mode of argument' and 'ideology' is problematic. As Vann notes, 'it is not clear... whether the tropes operate largely or entirely unconsciously'.<sup>17</sup> Secondly, White conception of 'events' as inert or passive objects waiting for the historian to classify and imbue them with 'meaning' is open to question. In this respect, Golob argued that White's emphasis on various historians differing emplotments of the "same set or sequence of events" points to a quasi-positivist understanding of events as "out there" to be "observed".<sup>8</sup> Scholars such as Jenkins and Harlan, in drawing on Derridan deconstructionism, completely dismantle the apparatus of historical 'reality'.

Language is understood not as conveying or representing 'reality' but as constituting it. Traditional historical concepts such as the stable 'self', linear 'time' and the capacity to apply critical methods to reveal 'truth-claims' are undermined. As Ankersmith puts it: "Historical time is a relatively recent and

highly artificial invention of Western civilization. It is a cultural, not a philosophical notion. Hence, founding narrativism on the concept of time is building on quicksand'. 0 Concepts of 'reality' and even the nature of history itself are brought into challenge. Reality becomes nothing more than a word beginning with 'r' and ending with 'y'; it is part of a discourse that supports relationships of power and domination.

Post-modern history, Jenkins contends is emancipatory and liberating; freeing history from elitist notions such as 'reality'. In particular he argues that any genre of discourse (theory, ideology, etc) is ethical "if and only if it is the aim of such genres - were they ever to become hegemonic - not to close down opposition genres'. 1 In this respect, 'reality' is unattainable and meaningless, history should appropriate what is useful not what is 'real': "What is at issue... is not our ability to know the past but our ability to find the predecessors we need".

Historical studies should, on this reading, discard the notion of 'reality' as simply a discursive construction. It is not only 'reality' that 'expunged' from the 'vocabulary' of the historian, it is the whole 'vocabulary' that is re-evaluated; criticised for support networks of discursive power-relations. 3

The deconstructionism of Jenkins and Harlan is unhelpfully reductive.

However, the insights of post-structuralism cannot be ignored. In particular, the role of 'language' in articulating 'meaning' and 'relationships of power' has convincingly challenged foundationalist notions of reality. Historical scholarship should not, however, give up the notion of 'reality' and collapse into a literary quagmire or be reduced to 'fiction'. Approaches which engage with post-structuralism but retain notions of 'critical method' are needed.

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For example, 'internal realism' argues that all knowledge is relative to particular epistemic contexts. Some scholars seem to have adopted Wittgenstein's contention that knowledge of the meaning of a concept presupposes a capacity to apply it; knowledge of its truth-conditions. 24 As Lorenz notes 'if the meaning of a concept did not presuppose knowledge of its truth conditions' then a language-user would be unable to tell the difference, for example, between someone in pain and someone who was not. 5 In this respect, different paradigms or conceptual frameworks will yield different 'facts'. Lorenz further notes that historical narratives are configured around normative notions. It would be more fruitful for these to be explicitly argued over rather than concealed under the mask of a spurious 'objectivity'. Both facts and values have to be justified through argumentation.

Recent scholarship seems to have been influenced by the principals of 'internal realism'. Kurtz, for example, points to how conceptual paradigms determine the variable or evidence drawn upon. 6 In this respect, definitions of peasants are, in Walker and Cohen's terminology, 'scope statements'. 27 It is suggested, by Kurtz, that definitional frameworks such as J. Scott anthropological materialism and Popkin's rational actor approach are examining different peasants. 28 In contrast, it is more relevant and useful to compare the empirical findings of Wolf and Scott. 29 In addition, Paige and Popkin both pose competing paradigms for understanding similar 'peasants'. 30 Thus, the definition adopted influences the content of 'analyses.

It could be argued that an explicit definitional pluralism aids 'analysis' of specific 'peasants' and provides a barrier against excessive generalization. Reality is thus, partially, restored by 'internal-realism'; it is relative to particular conceptual paradigms or frameworks. A problem with 'internal realism' is that it tends to circularity over conceptual categories and 'facts'. Another approach to understanding how 'reality' can be retained, in some degree, within historical studies is 'narrative theory'.

White's notion of 'narrativity' paradoxically provides a barrier against the more radical forms of linguistic relativism. As Partner notes 'formal theory, narrative theory, could actually be deployed as an effective defensive weapon against some of the more threatening dislocations that postmodernism has visited on history'.<sup>31</sup> In this respect, the 'Holocaust' has recently has been an area where the implications of post-modern thought have debated.<sup>32</sup> Linguistic relativism in rejecting truth claims seems to open up the possibility that events such as the Holocaust could be denied.

The 'Holocaust' should be understood as a 'category' for organising and classifying the practices of German Nazi government. It is thus a 'narrative category'. Although, 'holocaust' is a category it is one 'emplotted' on a set of 'real events'. White's retention of the existence of 'real events' sets limits on the forms of convincingly 'narrative'. In the context, of the Holocaust it has to be understood as a 'real event', the probabilities of evidence limit the forms of 'narrative' produced in relation to it. It would be illegitimate, given the 'evidence', to base 'narrative' on a denial of the Holocaust.



Language has to be understood within a material context, as relating to sets of linguistic and extra-linguistic relationships. Speigel coins the phrase 'the social logic of the text' to denote how language is socially generated both as a discursive and within a social context: 'Even if one accepts the poststructuralist argument that language constitutes the social world of meaning, it is possible to maintain that language itself acquires meaning and authority only within specific social and historical settings'. 34

Thus, 'reality' in historical scholarship has to be understood as more than simply a word beginning with 'r' and ending with 'y'. In particular, it signifies the historical professions commitment to 'honest' scholarship and defends against 'propaganda'. As Graton notes, in his historisation of the footnote, it is only the retention of a 'critical source' analysis method that: 'makes it possible to resist the efforts of modern governments, tyrannical and democratic alike, to conceal the compromises they have made, the deaths they have caused, the tortures they or their allies have inflicted'. 35

The 'linguistic turn' revised traditional epistemological and ontological concepts. In suggesting how 'language' operates as a discourse to articulate meaning, the basis of traditional scholarship was subverted. However, post-structuralism while useful should not be accepted wholesale. An understanding of how 'discourse' operates in material context is vital. How a linguistic and extra-linguistic reality relate to one another. In this respect, frameworks such as 'internal-realism' offer a step towards noting the relativity of knowledge while retaining the concept of 'reality' and ability to judge 'facts'.

Similarly, White narrative theory allows for some degree of 'reality' in the form of stable 'events' or 'facts' that are subject to only a limited number of 'narratives'. For instance, the Holocaust cannot be denied as an 'event' but can be is unfortunately still open to neo-Nazi narratives that are sympathetic to it. Normative issues should be made explicit in historical narratives and, as Lorenz, notes should be sites of argumentation. 36 Although, diminished 'reality' is more than simply a word beginning with 'r' and ending in 'y'.