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Whig Interpretation of History

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several of its principal ruins. His findings of synchronous artifacts at Arikamedu and Brahmagiri confirmed the dates of the megaliths of southern India. Wheeler was remarkable for his extraordinary energy, meticulousness, and diligence in his profession.

Pradip Bhaumik

References


Whig Interpretation of History
Primarily the view that lauds Britain's constitutional development and the emergence of religious and civic liberty; now applied in a more general sense, and derogatively, to any form of anachronistic or present-minded history. The Whig interpretation, in its primary and narrower sense, took shape around 1700 to justify the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Early Whig historians defended seventeenth-century parliamentary heroes and martyrs and the antiquity of the House of Commons. Narratives by James Tyrrell (1696–1704) and John Oldmixon (1724) suggested how England's foundations of liberty had been protected against power and priestcraft. Paul de Rapin-Thoyras, a French Huguenot, informed foreigners (in a narrative translated into English, 1725–1731) how the maintenance of an old and free Germanic constitution permitted England's rapid rise to world power since 1688. Even though Robert Brady had already unmasked the mythology of constitutional continuity, this Whig interpretation dominated English historiography through the mid-eighteenth century and, through Rapin-Thoyras and anglophile philosophers, influenced continental historiography as well.

The Whig tradition shifted from early vulgar Whiggism, through the skeptical Whiggism of David Hume, to the scientific Whiggism of Thomas Babington Macaulay. Hume's History of England (1754–1761) displaced Rapin-Thoyras's in the mid-eighteenth century and remained the dominant narrative for nearly a century. Whigs excoriated Hume for debunking their heroes and the mythical ancient constitution. But although a Tory in sympathies, Hume replaced these elements with his own Whiggish belief in progress. Between 1848 and 1879, Macaulay, Edward Augustus Freeman, and William Stubbs powerfully restored the Whig interpretation. These Victorian Whigs maintained the basic narrative: England had held on more securely to primitive Germanic institutions than to continental Europe; the Glorious Revolution vindicated ancient rights. But they now argued that a free constitution arose slowly only between Magna Carta and 1688. And they emphasized local institutions and long-range social processes rather than parliamentary heroes and individual acts or providence. Macaulay supplanted Hume by wedding Hume's stadial view of material progress to Edmund Burke's praise of England's continuity with its past even in the midst of change. Consensual politicians and moderate public discussion through the Reform Act of 1832 allowed tolerance, responsible government, the two-party system, and constitutional monarchy to flourish.

The Whig narrative of liberal development retreated in the 1880s. Historicism, archival research, source-criticism, and professionalization discredited narrative set pieces such as Anglo-Saxon democracy or baronial liberalism under King John. World War I further eroded liberal certainties, and, between the wars, historians began to criticize the Whig interpretation in both its narrow and itsgeneric senses. The most influential critique was a thin volume by Herbert Butterfield, entitled The Whig Interpretation of History, which censured the teleological focus on victorious Protestants and Whigs. Butterfield also decried the subordination of the past to the present and the stress on only the origins of contemporary institutions (whether from necessary selection and organization or from a disregard to changing context). Yet, while Butterfield criticized Whig progressivism in 1931, he would come to laud Whig traditionalism in The Englishman and His History in 1944 (a paradox explicable by recalling the various strands of Whiggism).

Whig spotting continues. The term is often used to attack historians who: emphasize inevitability (whether because of teleology, anachronism, or a penchant for the new and emerging); who reify
developing liberal institutions; or who elevate personal battles to conflicts of principles. But Marxist and social historians have been similarly criticized for projecting onto the past their own ideas of what is important. Perhaps too, the narrative mode of historical writing favored by Whigs necessarily emphasizes continuity and community.

Newton E. Key

References

White, Hayden (b. 1928)
American scholar of European historiography and cultural critic. As professor of the history of consciousness at the University of California at Santa Cruz, White has played a leading role since the 1970s in acquainting students of history in the United States with the rhetorical groundwork of historical writing. At a time when most of the efforts of theorists of history have been directed toward establishing history's credentials as a science, White has reexamined and reaffirmed its ancient standing as an art. In this respect, he has carried on the project of the English historicist R.G. Collingwood to explain history as a special kind of science, and so has refuted those analytical philosophers who chide historians for having failed to establish general laws of historical explanation. White contends that the natural sciences committed themselves in the seventeenth century to a particular model of employing scientific understanding. Historians never reached a corresponding consensus, in part because of the variety of rhetorical modes in which great works of history have been written. Historical understanding in its inception, White argues, is an imaginative act, akin to that of poets and novelists.

White's first major work, Metahistory (1973), was a comprehensive study of the diverse rhetorical strategies employed by the great nineteenth-century European historians (Jules Michelet, Leopold von Ranke, Alexis de Tocqueville, Jacob Burckhardt) and philosophers of history (G.W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Benedetto Croce). He has since elaborated on this theme in wide-ranging surveys of current issues in contemporary historiography, notably in The Tropics of Discourse (1978) and The Content of the Form (1987). White's theory of the "deep structure" of historical narrative is very much his own, although he acknowledges an intellectual debt to the literary theorists Northrop Frye and Kenneth Burke and to a lesser extent the French structuralists Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault.

Probably the most profound influence on his thinking has been the early-eighteenth-century Italian philosopher-historian, Giambattista Vico, whose theory of tropes provides the framework around which White composed Metahistory. For Vico, all thought has its sources in the logic of poetry's historically elaborated deep structures, the figures of speech (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony) that give form to all verbal expression. Following Vico, White argues that a historical work, like any imaginative endeavor, is in its inception a creative act, and that the poetic logic of the trope underpinning its narrative provides the key to its metahistorical identity. In Metahistory he types historians according to the tropological mode in which they employ their narrative. Herein he does not wish to reduce history to its rhetoric, or to discredit the importance of research. His point is that historians of necessity adopt models that prefigure the shape of their interpretation. The measure of a great work of history lies not merely in the data presented but in its rhetorical capacity to produce significant meaning.

White amplified his theory in arguing that these metahistorical models mobilize the rhetorical resources with which historians craft their interpretations. He presents these under three classifications: strategies for seeking truth (formism, mechanism, organicism, contextualism); story archetypes (romance, tragedy, comedy, satire); and justifying ideologies (anarchist, conservative, liberal, radical). The combination chosen from among this repertoire of possibilities defines a historian's historiographical style. The writing of a work of history, therefore, involves a dialectical move between imaginative prefiguration and a more reflective configuration of rhetorical possibilities.