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Contra Wight: the errors of a premature writing

DAVID CAMPBELL

Colin Wight has been obviously waiting some time to make his point. Much like a hunter who, with an old weapon and a handy supply of ammunition, has been frustrated by the lack of the right quarry, Wight has unloaded both barrels on the best available target. And what better target than 'MetaBosnia'! For one who might be a member of an imaginary Epistemic Realist Shooters Association—where the motto is evidently something like 'show us your epistemological framework so we can keep the relationship between world/word, fact/value and theory/practice conceptually clear and methodologically rigorous, damn it'—this review must have seemed like the ideal beast. With the plumage of a pomo, the cry of a relativist, and a pedigree that incorporates the misogyny and proto-fascism of its turn-of-the-century German forebears, perfect prey indeed.[1]

Too bad, then, that Wight did not clean his sights. With the smoke still in the air and his foot over the body, he notes at the end of his piece that he 'accepts' this review article is part of something larger where a more detailed account can be found.[2] Which is good, because the review makes this, and therefore its own limitations, quite clear. Too bad, then, that he couldn't have waited just a bit longer. Just long enough to buy the book (all royalties greatly received!) and read it—something he says he is looking forward to anyway. After all, contestation does require information. All responses are welcome, but only those which engage with the substance of the argument will be helpful. A little more patience on Wight's part might have saved both of us some time, because then he would have discovered that general issues such as the question of justification, and specific points such as his recommended turn to Derrida and the politics of the decision, are pivotal to my concerns and substantially developed in the larger project.[3]

[1] Wight's crude attempt to delegitimise Nietzsche by the invocation of some infamous references employs the same strategy as all those who have sought to marginalise continental thought. In so doing, it manifests no appreciation for the way claims about Nietzsche's 'elitism' have been contested. See, for example, the argument in Alan White, W*ithin Nietzsche's Labyrinth* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Wight also invests a great deal in the translation of Nietzsche's account of objectivity revolving around the idea of 'the thing'. Other translations suggest such etymological security may be misplaced; one renders Nietzsche speaking of 'the spectacle' rather than 'the thing', a concept which if accepted would have rather different implications. See Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. F. Golffing, New York: 1956, p. 255. My thanks to Martin Coward for this reference and additional comments.

[2] David Campbell, *National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity and Justice in Bosnia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

[3] However, Wight's claim that Derrida's argument buttresses the necessity of moving beyond contestation betrays a serious misunderstanding of both the idea of contestation and the position of Derrida, because for Derrida the process of decisioning is an inescapable part of contestation. See Campbell, *National Deconstruction*, especially ch. 6.

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Responding effectively to Wight's claims in the above piece is, therefore, more difficult than is normally the case when constrained by the brevity of a rejoinder. 'MetaBosnia' uses reflections on Hayden White to review some narratives of the Bosnian war (a substantive topic about which Wight has nothing to say), and draw out the inescapable place of interpretation and representation in seemingly objectivist accounts. The review is used to pose the issue of judgement as a question, with the reference to Nietzschean perspectivism designed to suggest that in posing that question we do not have to limit ourselves to the stale binary of objectivism/relativism (a point by now well established but which nonetheless has evidently failed to perturb Wight's epistemic faith).[4] As a result, the review is some way from having the status even of 'a vehicle to sketch the outlines of what [Campbell] calls "a different objectivity".'

Wight has thus somewhat mischievously taken the self-conscious posing of a question, without any attempt to provide in the review the details of an answer, as evidence that the answer when it comes will be flawed. He has pre-emptively used a reflection about historiography's thorniest issue to proffer a reading of what my argument *might* be so that he can then draw out what *must* be the implications, and take it to task for what it allegedly *does* leave out. In consequence, Wight does more than *read* my argument and subject to it to the inescapably different interpretations it might generate—he *writes* it, filling in the gaps which are not there, because for some reason he was unable to wait for the substance.

Wight's writing of my argument so that he can then show its purported deficiencies is, therefore, revealing only of his own position(s). Given that my argument about historical representation and judgement takes the better part of a book to set out, all that can be done here is to highlight some of the many erroneous aspects in Wight's account. I'll limit myself to what I view as three of the most significant.

1. The epistemological fixation

The initial flaw in Wight's account of my purported position is that he frames it as an epistemological issue. Not only does this bring to bear on the issue his own preferences and prejudices—ones which, while having an aura of progressive critique, come across as fairly conservative—he will find out in chapters 1 and 3 of the book that I go to some lengths to try and demonstrate how questions of historical interpretation and judgement are predominantly ethico-political rather than epistemological. As I argue there, my interest is in outlining an ethos of political criticism concerned with our responsibility to the other, rather than detailing a theory, establishing an epistemological framework and legislating methodological precepts. That is because I think, especially in International Relations, when many people argue in reified terms about epistemologies and methodologies they are more often than not delineating positions which themselves are ethico-political and cannot, in terms of their own logic, be epistemologically defended and secured. For that reason, to place even intimations of my argument as

[4] See, for example, Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, Oxford, 1983.

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part of 'much talk of a "postmodern epistemology"' (whose talk? and why, *despite citable declarations to the contrary*, does Wight think it legitimate to regard me as 'a self-proclaimed postmodernist/poststructuralist writer'?) is way wide of the mark. But let's assume we accept Wight's reduction of everything to an epistemological register and give legitimacy to his question 'which epistemology did you use?' Where does Wight delineate his own epistemology? Where is there a mention, even, of his own criteria for historical and political judgement? Where does Wight inform us about how he would reach a conclusion about which were the better accounts of the Bosnian war?

2. The historical record

I think Wight is greatly confused about White on the status of the historical record. This is because Wight in the beginning takes the historical record to be the narratives of historians (as he says, 'the words of the authors') yet, by the end, gives the impression it also encompasses time-space specific events in the past. However, the whole point of White's argument, and the whole point of my review drawing out a chronology from the narratives to show how those narratives emplot those events, is to demonstrate that the historical record—those time-space specific events that can be ordered into a chronology—does not itself provide a story. As such, the whole point of the review's chronology was to show how (a) those events have no general meaning until they are emplotted, and (b) the stories that are narrated by the copiously-cited author's texts cannot be justified only by reference to the events. In summarising White's position, this is what I wrote:

> White is careful to argue that historical events are different from fictional ones; the former 'can be assigned to specific time-space locations, events which are (or were) in principle observable or perceivable', while the latter are 'imagined, hypothetical, or invented'. But he wants to insist 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'. This leads to his most controversial claim: the centrality of narrative means 'that when it comes to apprehending the historical record there are no grounds to be found in the historical record *itself* for preferring one way of construing its meaning over another'.[5]

What we are concerned with, therefore, is the way a preference for the form of one narrative—its representational style, argumentative structure, conclusions and implications—cannot be justified by recourse to time-space specific events. This cannot be taken to mean that time-space specific events are fictional irrelevancies. Again, let me quote from 'MetaBosnia's' brief conclusion:

> While it is not difficult to argue that one should give greater credence to those accounts which are more comprehensive than others, or more self-reflexive about their own presuppositions

[5] David Campbell, 'MetaBosnia: A Review of Narratives of the Bosnian War', *Review of International Studies*, 24 (1998), p. 262 (the final emphasis added here). One of White's weaknesses, which I explore in more detail in *National Deconstruction*, is that although his argument is critical of historical realism, it often seems to depend on similar positivist assumptions—especially when he distinguishes the historical record from narrative—to those he is working against. Wight, however, by dressing all his targets in the garb of 'postmodernism', misses this.

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and their impact on the representation of particular events, in the end the above review demonstrates that the basic points of White's argument hold. Events in a chronology do not by themselves legitimate one particular narrative over and above others. Those events, which attain that status by being emplotted in the first place, can be narrated in different ways (or overlooked entirely), often to support contradictory conclusions. The consequence of that, uncomfortable though it may be, is that a recourse to the historical record will not by itself resolve the issue of which is better or worse.[6]

While the constitutive relationship between stories and their specifics means we cannot separate 'events' and 'narratives' into two distinct domains (as is suggested by phrasings such as world/word etc, and sometimes even by White himself), neither can they be confused as the same concept, as Wight appears to do. When this basic point is appreciated—and it is understood that for White the historical record concerns historical events and not historical narratives—then Wight's claims about the supposed distance that comes from my supposed modification of White's argument vanishes. Moreover, when we appreciate this basic point then Wight's claims that the exercise of reading the narratives would in White's terms be pointless, and therefore this implies no role for empirical research, are as nonsensical as they appear. Focusing on what the narratives say and how they say it is at the heart of White's project. Problematising appeals to the historical record as the basis for judging narratives cannot be construed as arguing the historical record is irrelevant (which is why White draws a distinction between historical events and fictional ones). I can only think that Wight has taken his own defective conclusions to heart and failed to read White.

3. Narrative and problematisation

Wight concludes his response with a point concerning the claim that narratives performatively constitute the realities they merely claim to describe. To be 'astonished' at this point is possible only if the basics of White's position are either not grasped or not accepted. While the latter is legitimate, Wight's suggestion that this argument implies the patently absurd notion of backward causation betrays the former. Again, Wight's failure to grasp the relationship between narrative and the historical record seems to me to be the problem. Nowhere in my argument or White's (and the two are not synonymous, for although I accept White's basic points, there are many problems with how White considers the question of justification, as my book makes clear) are there grounds for the idea that a book written in 1994–96 can retrospectively change time-space specific events in 1990–92. I have to confess I'm still gob-smacked that Wight thought it possible to think such a thing.

At the same time, I'm disturbed (though by this stage perhaps not surprised) that Wight does not understand how the narrativisation of events into stories with moral purposes partake in the constitution of realities that have political effects, even as

[6] Ibid, p. 279. It is a gross misreading on Wight's part to suggest that the first sentence of this quote reveals I 'reject' and 'discard' questions of comprehensiveness and self-reflexivity as criteria for judgement because White makes them 'untenable'. The point is that while 'one should give greater credence' to accounts that are more comprehensive and self-reflexive *vis-à-vis* time-space specific events, the review demonstrates that such criteria alone are insufficient when judging narratives.

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those narratives claim the status of dispassionate and descriptive observer. One specific example of this with regard to Bosnia is the way in which a travelogue such as Rebecca West's pre-World War II *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* influenced in both style and substance Robert Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts*, which in turn was read by President Clinton and others at a critical juncture in 1993 and helped make possible—because of the story of ancient and violent animosities it told—the American reluctance to take action.[7] The more important issue, of which this example is but one illustration, is that conceptions of history and identity are not descriptive but constitutive of a terrain of possibility through which events are framed and responses debated.[8]

Together, then, the narratives of academics, journalists, map-makers, political leaders and strategists have problematised Bosnia in a particular manner, making some policies likely and others unlikely. Wight's rhetorical incredulity about the relationship between 'victims of mass rape and ethnic cleansing' and 'simply writing different kinds of histories' therefore fails to even begin to grasp the way in which different renderings of 'Bosnia' by both analysts and participants in the conflict created (albeit through different practices) the conditions of possibility for the violence, and continue to create the conditions of (im)possibility for its overcoming.[9] It also fails to grasp the way in which, even with its many limitations, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia—with its extensive evidentiary hearings, indictments and trials functioning as sites for the re-narration of the conflict—is required and supported by 'the victims' in their pursuit of justice.

Wight disparages these positions because he tries to maintain a firewall between 'the past' and 'its interpretation'. However, while different interpretations differently narrate time-space specific events but do not retrospectively change their materiality, those different narratives can most certainly change the past insofar as we cannot apprehend the past without those narratives. Failing to appreciate that performative power of narrativisation and the politics of its production means Wight forecloses on numerous sites for contestation. Wight wants historical justification to serve progressive politics. But epistemological frameworks and foundations are highly unlikely to function effectively in this regard. No amount of disciplinary theorising rooted in the contested metatheoretical world of epistemic realism will foment an ethico-political ethos.

[7] See Brian Hall, 'Rebecca West's War', *The New Yorker*, 15 April 1996. The impact of Kaplan's book on the administration's policy is confirmed by former Secretary of State Warren Christopher's book, *In the Stream of History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 347. For the impact on, and use of, this story on British policy-makers, see Noel Malcolm, 'The Whole Lot of Them Are Serbs', *The Spectator*, 10 June 1995; and Ed Vuillamy, 'Anthrax Follies', *The Guardian*, 25 March 1998.

[8] This can be illustrated in the way in which maps of Bosnia, its population and the military situation—cartographic narratives of census and spatial data—elide their constitutive role in making partition possible through their positivist protocols. See David Campbell, 'Apartheid Cartography: The Political Anthropology and Spatial Effects of International Diplomacy on Bosnia', *Political Geography* (forthcoming 1999). This article and the accompanying maps, with a further analysis, is available at <http://newcastle.ac.uk/~npol/maps/bosnia>.

[9] Robert M. Hayden, 'Imagined Communities and Real Victims: Self-Determination and Ethnic Cleansing in Yugoslavia', *American Ethnologist*, **23** (4) 1996, pp. 783–801.

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