



Rethinking History

The Journal of Theory and Practice

ISSN: 1364-2529 (Print) 1470-1154 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rrhi20>

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To cite this article: María Inés La Greca (2016): Hayden White and Joan W. Scott's feminist history: the practical past, the political present and an open future, Rethinking History

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2016.1205813>



Published online: 13 Jul 2016.



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Hayden White and Joan W. Scott's feminist history: the practical past, the political present and an open future

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ABSTRACT

My aim in this article is to reflect on White's pessimism towards contemporary academic history as manifested in his latest proposal of distinguishing the practical past from the historical past. I will test White's pessimism against one particular mode of academic history, feminist history, and claim that the critical distinction between the practical past and the historical past does not suit historical writing by feminist scholars. Furthermore, I will reflect on how feminist history has acknowledged and productively assumed *Metahistory's* critical conclusions for its own practice. To make my point, I will present Joan Wallach Scott's reflections on the development of feminist history as, in White's terminology, motivated by a practical interest in the past and a political interest in the present. However, feminist scholars also wanted to established a historical past for women, that is, a legitimate position in academia for producing women's history. Thus, Scott's narration of feminist history manifests a productive confusion of what White urges us to distinguish in his latest book. By appealing to Scott's *The Fantasy of Feminist History*, I will analyze the difficult relationship between criticism and narration that the work of both Scott and White displays as they reach, from different directions, the same pressing question: the need to refigure the relationship between academic practice and social life.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 15 May 2016; Accepted 20 June 2016

KEYWORDS Hayden White; Joan W. Scott; practical past; feminist history; historical writing

Introduction

When White published *Metahistory* in 1973, his aim was to offer a formal-textual analysis of nineteenth-century historical work that would produce a liberating criticism of the historian's self-understanding of his or her academic

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practice. Foremost, White aimed at highlighting the poetic function of language in historical writing, an aspect of the historian's task that was either repressed or undermined in the traditional historiographical frame of mind. Moreover, he optimistically concluded that, following his advice, historians would be 'freed to conceptualize history, to perceive its contents, and to construct narrative accounts of its processes in whatever modality of consciousness is most consistent with their own moral and aesthetic aspirations' (White 1973, 434).

As we know, *Metahistory* concludes that when it is a matter of choosing among alternative visions of history, the only grounds for preferring one over another are moral or aesthetic ones: there can be no 'proper history' that is not at the same time a philosophy of history because there are no apodictically certain theoretical grounds on which one can legitimately claim authority for a particular mode of prefiguration, emplotment, and so on, as more 'realistic.' This means that we are indentured to a *choice* among contending interpretative strategies in any effort to reflect on history (White 1973, xxii).

The extent of the debate that White's work provoked is equally well known. Although some critics feared that White's take on the fundamental function of tropes, discourse and imagination in historical writing would weaken the epistemic status of historical studies or, worse, conflate history with literature and fiction, recent publications reveal a spirit of celebration regarding White's critical intervention – the more optimistic writers even claim that the key to reading his work is an existential exhortation for historians to produce history-for-life.¹

However, in 2014 White published his latest book, *The Practical Past*, in which he does not seem to share the optimism of these recent interpreters regarding the historical profession's willingness to assume the linguistic self-consciousness that he has been demanding of contemporary historical writing. My aim here is to reflect on the pessimism towards contemporary academic history visible in his new proposal to distinguish the practical past from the historical past – or perhaps even to do away with the latter completely. I will test White's pessimism against one particular mode of academic history that manifestly embraces a self-conscious practice of writing: feminist history. I will claim that the critical distinction between the practical past and the historical past does not fit historical writing by feminist scholars. Furthermore, I will claim that feminist history has acknowledged and productively assumed *Metahistory's* critical conclusions for its own practice – even if feminist scholars have not always read them.

In order to make my case, I will present Joan Wallach Scott's reflections on the development of feminist history. Reading Scott, we find that it is these kinds of intellectual endeavors, motivated by a practical interest in the past and a political interest in the present, that best realize what Hayden White has in mind when rejecting a historical interest in the past. But it seems, on the other hand, that feminist scholars also wanted to establish a historical past for women,

that is, a legitimate position in academia for producing knowledge about women's pasts. I will show how Scott's narration of feminist history manifests a productive confusion between the kinds of approaches to the past that White urges us to distinguish in his latest book. Furthermore, by appealing to a recent book on feminism's history by Scott, I will reflect on the difficult relationship between criticism and narration that both Scott and White demonstrate by their mutual concern on the same issue: the relationship between academic practice and social life.

The practical past: Hayden White against the historical past

In the preface to *The Practical Past*, White states that, throughout his life, he has been interested in the relationship between history and literature (White 2014, ix). For any reader of his work this is obvious; we are, after all, dealing with one of the most representative theoreticians of the relationship between fact and fiction, narrativity and historical knowledge, figuration and historical understanding. He adds that, when he has previously spoken of history writing as a mixture of fact and fiction, or even suggested that – through being narrative in kind – history writing could be best understood as literature, and therefore fiction, this was misleading. He failed to make clear, he says, that he was employing 'fiction' in Jeremy Bentham's sense of 'a kind of invention or construction based on a hypothesis rather than a manner of writing or thinking focused on purely imaginary or fantastic entities' (White 2014, xii).

He goes on, however, to affirm that historiography is a genre of writing that belongs to the category or class of artistic prose discourses. Here, what follows is White's well-known critical narration of the way historiography acquired its professional academic status after the early nineteenth century on the basis of its claim to 'objectivity,' by distancing itself from – and repudiating and repressing its common origin in – rhetoric and *belles lettres*. This self-perception seemed not to conflict with historians believing that 'the truths of history were best conveyed in the idiom of well-told narratives.' White adds:

So let me make clear on this occasion that, as far as I am concerned, the past is made up of events and entities which once existed but no longer do; that historians properly believe that this past can be accessed and made sense of by studying the traces of this past existing in the present; and that finally, the historical past consists of the referents of those aspects of the past studied and then represented (presented) in the genres of writing which, by convention, are called 'histories' and are recognized to be such by the professional scholars *licensed* to decide what is 'properly' historical and what is not. (White 2014, xiii)

White thus yields some ground to the professional historian's conviction that 'history' and 'historicality' 'are whatever practicing historians considered them to be.' Knowing the strong criticism that White's work provoked when his position was interpreted as attacking the historical profession's ability to

offer reliable knowledge of the past – or, even, as denying the existence of past entities and events – this formulation may seem to be a retreat from his earlier controversial claims.²

But we may quickly reject this reading as White moves toward his characterization of ‘the historical past’ by following Michael Oakeshott’s distinction between the historical and the practical past. Although White’s use of this distinction supports the readings that highlight his ongoing call to historians to liberate themselves from the limits that a commitment to a naïve and literalist conception of language has imposed on their practice as writers, it seems that this latest reflection expresses a profound pessimism concerning the historical profession’s will, or even interest, in embracing more ethically committed writing practices.³

White describes the historical past as: (a) a theoretical construction, a highly selective version of the past, with no interest in anything that could be related to the present situation of the historian or his/her readers; (b) a study of the past as an end in itself and for its own sake; (c) a strictly impersonal and neutral object, built by historians, that only exists in books and academic essays; (d) a past that teaches no lessons of present interest and that no-one could have experienced, by virtue of its retrospective-description nature. Thus, White is saying that the historical past is useless for ethical decision-making or political action and, if we have any doubt, we can confirm this by listing the features of its opposite, ‘the practical past’.

The practical past refers to: (a) notions of the past that people hold in everyday life; (b) the sphere of memory, dream and desire; (c) ideas to which we appeal, at will or not, to face practical problems in present situations – ‘in anything from personal matters to grand political programs’ – and for creating tactics and strategies for negotiating personal and collective life.

It is important to pay attention to some of the clarifications that White offers. Firstly, he wants to distinguish between the past (which he describes ‘as a constantly changing whole or totality of which the historical past is only a part,’) the historical past and the practical past. Secondly, White claims that the practical past is different from the historical past because the former cannot be handled according to the principle so dear to the professional historian – ‘first the facts, then the interpretation’:

Since such pasts are invested less in the interest of establishing the facts of a given matter than that of providing a basis in fact from which to launch a judgment of action in the present (...) in inquiries into these kinds of past, what is at issue is not so much ‘What are the facts?’ as, rather, ‘What will be allowed to count as fact?’ and, beyond that, ‘What will be permitted to pass for a specifically “historical” as against a merely “natural” (or for that matter, a “supernatural”) event?’ (White 2014, 15)

Finally, White states that he does not see them as two different ontological or epistemic pasts but rather, as two different kinds of intentions that motivate

questions concerning the past. While the historical past is of little or no value for understanding and acting on the present or foreseeing the future, the practical past does fulfill this function. Thus, interest in the practical past is relevant for White because we draw on it when we need to answer the question ‘What should we do?’ – whereas the information provided by the historical past would offer no justification for inferring what we, in our situation, in our time and our place, should do.

With this opposition, White seems to be rejecting academic historiography altogether and claiming – as he has been doing since *Figural Realism* – that the relevant form of historical writing for our present is to be found in modernist literature (White 1999, 2006, 2010, 2012). Thus, he claims that:

The practical past, however, *is* amenable to a literary – which is to say, an artistic or poetic – treatment that is anything but “fictional” in the sense of being purely imaginary or fantastic in kind. A literary treatment of the past – as displayed in various instances of the modern(ist) novel (but also in poetic and dramatic discourses) – has the real past as its ultimate referent (what, in discourse theory, is referred to as “the substance of its content”), but focuses on those aspects of the real past which the historical past cannot deal with. (White 2014, xiv)

So, White’s life-long reflection on the relationship between history and literature ends up with him preferring modernist literature, the kind of literary writing that Woolf, Proust and Joyce have explored, as the kind of historical writing that our twentieth-century historical condition demands.

The political present: Joan W. Scott on feminism and historical writing

One way to challenge White’s distinction between the historical and the practical past – or at least its conclusion of abandoning all academic historiography – is to recall the theoretical and political experience of feminism in history. Since that is a broad topic, I choose to follow Joan Wallach Scott’s reflections on feminist historical writing. My aim is to examine Scott as a highly respected historian, feminist and thinker, and compare her reflections regarding the project of women’s history with White’s criticism of professional historiography.

In *Feminism and History*, Scott introduces a volume with different perspectives from feminist historians. In that introduction we find a narration of their historiographical practice. Although there are antecedents in the previous centuries, Scott relates how historians, inspired by the feminist movement of the 1960s, decided to counter women’s subordination as it was reproduced by their invisibility in historical accounts: they ‘set out to establish not only women’s presence, but their active participation in the events that were seen to constitute history’ (Scott 1996, 2). If this invisibility contributed in part to reinforce women’s oppression in the past and the present, then making them visible, showing them as subjects and agents of history, would help in their emancipation. Thus,

the first task that feminist history undertook was to recover stories of women's action to put forward 'another way of seeing and understanding what counted as history' (Scott 1996, 3). To quote Scott:

For if women were present and active, then history was neither the story of 'man's' heroism nor the means by which exclusive masculine agency (rational, self-determining, self-representing) was affirmed. As a corrective to the phallogentric themes of most historical accounts, women were portrayed as makers of history.

Scott claims that feminist historians were able to 'unearth new facts' – to provide new information about women's behavior but also knowledge for understanding women and history anew. Nonetheless, the use of the metaphor of visibility brought some contradictions to the feminist historians' task: according to Scott, by equating visibility with transparency, they understood their task simply as the recovery of previously ignored facts. But when questions of why these facts had been ignored and how they were now to be understood were raised, women's history became more than the search for facts. For this reason, 'making women visible' needed to be reformulated: it had to be understood as not just a matter of providing new information from previously ignore facts, but as a matter of 'advancing new interpretations which not only offered new readings in politics, but the changing significance of families and sexuality' (Scott 1996, 3).

So, it seems that right from the start the project of feminist history had to face the very limits of historical imagination. This project would not aim solely at making women in the past visible. It was not enough to 'add' women's history to the discipline, to write it as a complement or corrective of previous historical accounts. It was, instead, soon understood as a critical stance concerning the whole idea of what history was and how to write it – and one which implied changing the Western phallogentric notion of what could count as historical (men's actions) and what could not (women's actions). By challenging the idea of history that pretended to represent humanity in time but in reality was promoting a biased idea of history as history-of-masculinity, feminist historians introduced sexual difference or gender as key components of historical accounts.

It would not be necessary to recap Scott's account fully in order to see that for feminist history the historical past had always been a practical past, and *vice versa*. The whole project of writing women's history aimed at freeing women from an oppression that included their being 'hidden from history,' being denied a historical past of their own. Already at the beginning of Scott's account, we can see that historical writing for feminist historians was driven by the search of more and better knowledge of the past as much as it was driven by a need to draw from it new strategies for their present situation, for negotiating personal and collective women's life and providing themselves a better present and future against past and present oppression. Having a history meant having a *historical* past, and not just 'a past.' Having a history meant having a historiography that accounted for them as subjects of history and that produced legitimate

knowledge about women's experience through time. The feminist project was both practical and historical at once.

As we saw, White claims that inquiries into the practical past are less driven by the question of 'What are the facts?' than by questions of what will be allowed to count as fact and to pass for a specifically 'historical' as opposed to a merely 'natural' event. Well, feminist history, as Scott tells it, began as a struggle to demonstrate that women actions in the past were not permitted to count as facts even though they should have. Moreover, feminist history, in accordance with the notion of 'the practical past,' was set to show that women's oppression was not a 'natural' event, but a 'historical' one – contingent, changeable and not necessary. We could thus say that, in light of White's distinction, feminist history began as a practical past. Scott's claim that it was inspired mostly by the feminist movement of the 1960s would confirm that. However, if it started from an interest in the practical past, in White's terms, then feminist history quickly transformed itself into an interest in the historical past *as well*. Or better put: feminist history could be seen as an example of a kind of historical writing that productively confuses a historical and a practical interest in the past. It made the supposed *historical* past *practical* too. It was at the same time a claim to knowledge and the search for a political strategy. Why could these aspects not go together?

But my argument does not stop here. I do not claim that White's distinction is useless. Instead, it is a symptom of something else. My own interpretation – which I have presented in more detail elsewhere – is that the topic of the practical past expresses the same desire for a progressive historiography originally stated in *Metahistory*, albeit now, forty years after, in a pessimistic tone – and that pessimism tells us something worth listening to (La Greca 2014b).⁴ One might even say that White's permanent interest in the relationship between history and literature ends up as a preference for literature against history because he does not see a way out of the conservative and non-practically oriented self-perception of this academic discipline. White's desire to empower historical writing with every resource of imaginative writing – tropes, figures, plot-structures, and so on – appears as unfulfilled, and underlies his reflection on the practical past. But I believe that feminist history does fulfill White's desire. To put it more precisely, the kind of linguistic self-consciousness and imaginative ability that White urged historians to assume has been assumed by feminist historians (and thinkers) like Joan Wallach Scott.

White claims that the principle of 'first the facts, then the interpretation' characterizes what he is critically referring to as 'the historical past.' And already in *Metahistory*, he attacked such a principle with his hypothesis of the necessity of a prefigurative act, poetic and linguistic in nature, in any historical work. This idea of prefiguration implied that a particular *metahistory*, or philosophy of history, sustained every historical narrative – whether 'proper history' or some nefarious speculative philosophy of history. In what follows, I will return

to Scott's reflections on the peripeteia of feminist history in order to show how it manifests the validity of this celebrated insight by White: that the way we describe the historical field does not 'transparently' reflect it, but poetically constitutes it, that this poetics of history amounts to the implicit philosophy of history of historical works, and that it is this different and irreducible way of speaking about the past as a historical field that historians discuss when facing alternative accounts of what they considered to be the same historical processes.

As we saw, the founding metaphor of visibility in feminist history was internally challenged by the very development of feminist history. The twofold success of feminist historians' work created a dilemma for feminist history and politics. As different accounts of women's lives and actions in different centuries and countries were offered, feminist historians were faced with empirical evidence for the irreducible differences among women. At the same time, the very practically-oriented project of writing the history of women implied presupposing a coherent, singular and even timeless category of woman, a particular subject of history with some kind of essential identity that would be the same across places and times. Thus, showing women's place and relevance in history would have functioned as an argument against past and present-day oppression. But this very presupposition, the one that allowed feminist politics to be unified under a single identity, was challenged by the spectacle of differences between women that historical research yielded. Let me illustrate this by quoting from Scott:

Feminism's search for a common ground for 'women' repressed differences but it did not eliminate them. We can read the history of feminist movements in terms of a tension between unity and difference. In the United States, feminists divided over questions of slavery and race. Not everyone accepted Sojourner Truth's argument in 1851 that she, too, was a woman having borne and nursed thirteen children. In fact, claims for women's rights often came from feminists who did not include African-Americans when they spoke of 'women' in universalist terms. Early in the twentieth century a meeting of French feminists divided over the question of class. When the majority defeated a resolution calling for a day off for domestic servants (some delegates argued that girls with free time might become prostitutes), socialists among them denounced feminism as a cloak for middle-class women's interests. Some argued that there could never be solidarity among women across class lines. Defending feminism as a movement for all women (and 'women' as a homogeneous category), Hubertine Auclert replied, 'there cannot be a bourgeois feminism and a socialist feminism because there are not two female sexes'. (Scott 1996, 5-6)

Scott (1996, 4) shows that it was the very creation of women as subjects of history that – by placing them temporally in the contexts of their action, and explaining the possibilities for such action in terms of those contexts – allowed feminists to acknowledge examples of fundamental differences 'in experience and self-understanding among women, potentially undermining the political task of creating an enduring common identity.' She presents this dilemma as pointing to essentialist tendencies in feminist politics that soon became the

focus of internal debate. The axes of race, class, ethnicity, religion and sexuality complicated the notion of a singular and coherent identity of women. The appearance of radical feminism, as Scott tells us, revealed ‘serious fractures in feminist solidarity.’ Considering heterosexuality as the source of women’s oppression, Monique Wittig, for example, claimed that lesbians ‘were not “women” since they were outside the symbolic economy of heterosexual relationships.’ (Scott 1996, 6)

Scott goes on to explain that as differences among feminist activists became increasingly visible and contested, feminist historians (many of them activists as well) sought to understand difference by historicizing it. But, she adds, ‘peopling women’s history with the complexity and diversity that characterizes standard histories focused on men’ did not mean avoiding essentializing the different descriptive labels of ‘working-class,’ ‘African-American,’ ‘Islamic’ women and others. However, as the metaphor of visibility ‘assumed *and* contradicted the transparency of the social category “women,” so histories of different groups of women implicitly raised questions about the relational and contingent nature of difference’ (1996, 7–8). Questions regarding relationships between the different axes that intersect identity became possible, about priority of class over gender, or *vice versa*, the ways in which they connected with each other and the ways in which they were contradictory or opposed. Scott believes that in the late twentieth century ‘difference’ became an important analytic category for feminism, demanding that feminist scholars, activists and historians study how those differences were constructed. Again, these histories of difference were both consolidated as categories of identity and shown to be relative to specific historical contexts. Thus, the centrality of historicizing difference also became controversial: some scholars feared the theoretical and political implications of constructionist or relativist approaches, arguing that attending to the construction of categories of difference would distract them from the activities of real women. For others, any relativism would undermine the possibilities for political action. There were also arguments about the differences between women and men as well as among women being self-evident and, consequently, claims that abstract theoretical analyses of them would lead to unnecessary complications. Scott describes these controversies among feminist historians as responding, in part, to *different philosophies of history*:

those with a more or less positivist outlook who want to report what really happened (in the case of feminists, to correct the biases that masculinist views have imposed on our knowledge of the past) are in conflict with those who insist that history cannot recover an unmediated past, but rather actively produces visions of the past. (Scott 1996, 9)

In this way at least, the feminist historians’ debate manifests the kind of self-consciousness that White wanted from historical writing. The standpoint embracing the impossibility of recovering an unmediated past would be a ‘philosophy of history’ more attuned to White’s desire for a progressive history

and an interest in the practical past – whereas the more positivist outlook that Scott presents as another philosophy of history would be part of what White has criticized as a lack of linguistic self-consciousness and, recently, as an interest in the historical past. As *Metahistory* showed, while historians pretend to be simply describing the historical field, they are actually prefiguring it. Prefiguration meant following one tropological mode of description rather than another to establish *by linguistic means* the form of the objects and relations between objects in the supposed historical field (White 1973, 1978). This linguistic constitution of the historical field highlights similarities or differences according to the particular way that each of the four master tropes would integrate or disperse the entities in the field. I recall this because I believe that we can read Scott's account of the tension between identity and difference in conceptualizing the category 'women' as the challenge that feminist historians face when trying to describe, that is, *to prefigure*, their historical field.⁵ This reading allows us to see feminist history as a historical writing practice that was not only born out of a practical interest in the past but had also undertaken a critical examination of the competing interpretations it has offered regarding women's history that at least in part manifests a linguistic self-consciousness regarding how the way to describe the historical field conditions the historical interpretation of their object of study. This awareness on how the linguistic, epistemological, ethical and aesthetical dimensions of historical discourse are always in play in different degrees, without being reducible to one another, marks the critical writing of feminist history.

If the reader is convinced by my argument, we can conclude that the case of feminist history allows countering White's pessimism and claiming, instead, that there is hope for the kind of progressive historiography that he has been asking historians to engage in since the 1970s.⁶ Linguistically self-conscious, ethically and politically driven, feminist history would be the way to go. But I believe that my argument also permits the identification of another kind of pessimism that it is important to pay attention to, one that even feminist history has come to face: pessimism towards the capacity of academic history to contribute to positive change in the social world.

An open future: rewriting the narratives of feminism and historical studies

I already quoted Scott's analysis of the tensions within feminist history between its political imperatives and the relativizing effects of showing the historical and contingent nature of the very identity of 'women.' For Scott, this is a tension worth living with: although differences between women challenge the possibility of establishing a common agenda and political agreements are produced by intense negotiations, 'it is this political process that identifies "women;" they do not exist as identical natural beings outside of it' (Scott 1996, 7).⁷ But

the optimistic spirit of *Feminism and History* has been challenged, as Scott notes in her 2011 book, *The Fantasy of Feminist History*. Here, almost twenty years later, Scott again takes stock of what she now terms *feminism's history*. Her new narrative does not highlight the emergence of women's history and the theoretical and political tension brought about by its success: now the key question is how the incorporation of feminist studies as a legitimate research area in academia threatens feminism's critical drive.⁸

As I cannot reproduce Scott's new narrative fully here, I will mention some of the key issues she raises. She recounts the progress toward feminism's goals regarding history writing. Although she believes their accomplishments to be uneven, she claims that since the 1970s feminists have gained a rightful position in history as shown by 'an enormous written corpus, an imposing institutional presence, a substantial list of journals, and a foothold in popular consciousness' (Scott 2011, 24). They have clearly been successful in incorporating women into history – but not as successful in reconceiving history in terms of gender. Although feminism aimed at 'taking over history' and changing the way stories would be told, women historians and women's history are not yet equal players in the discipline.

However, what is most interesting in Scott's recent reflection is not how much has been gained and how much is still left to achieve but, rather, the uncomfortable feeling that she registers in academic feminism because of its success in its aims: 'legitimacy, for those who began as revolutionaries, is always an ambiguous accomplishment' (Scott 2011, 25). And she continues:

The realization of at least some positive change since the early 70's (...) has produced some ambivalence and uncertainty about the future. Have we won or lost? Have we been changed by our success? What does the move from embattled outsider to recognized insider portend for our collective identity? Has our presence transformed the discipline, or have we simply been absorbed into it? (...) Does women's history have a future, or is it history? How might we imagine its future?

Scott reflects on how, no longer being insurgents, feminist historians have become disciplinarians, which amounts to 'something of a letdown in this change of identity,' given that it is not the same thing to criticize disciplinary power from the outside as it is to do so from the inside, that is, by being committed to teaching established bodies of scholarship. Moreover, Scott also claims that academic feminism, having gained institutional credibility, seems to have lost its close connection to the political movement that inspired it.

For a comparison of White's and Scott's reflections on their disciplines, it is interesting to note how they arrive at a similar crossroads from opposing starting points: White writes about a historical profession in crisis, the risk to which is to become (or remain) conservative and detached from the need for historical self-understanding in everyday life – thus, he invites historians to revolutionize the discipline; whereas Scott writes about a revolutionary attempt in social life that aimed at transforming the way history was written (and hence the historical profession), the risk to which now seems to be that of becoming conservative and detached from social life, *because of having become* an academic discipline.

A comparative reading of White's distinction of the practical past and Scott's reflection on the past, present and future of feminist history (or feminism's history) point, to me, to the same problematic: the value of history as an academic discipline for life. It is clear in White's *Practical Past* that he views the disciplinization of historical studies as a loss of the political potential of historical reflection. While, in the 1970s, he was moved by a desire to liberate historians' writing in order to regain the power of imagining history, he is now, in 2014, pessimistic about any change coming from academia and hopes that literature might free us from the burden of history (White 1999, 2006, 2012, 2014).⁹ In Scott's case, a historiographical project – that had also always been a critical and politically oriented one – takes stock of itself now, after winning a legitimate place in academia, and wonders if this is a gain or a loss. What Scott laments is that the original project aimed at a complete transformation of our idea of history yet it seems that this has not been achieved. What we can read in Scott is the question of how to articulate a power position in academia – how to produce feminist interpretations of the past as legitimate knowledge – without sacrificing the original aim of a deep transformation in our notion of history.

The practical, the political, and the future appear here again as a question of what should be done (and how to do it). In this sense, there is a coincidence in White's and Scott's reflections: how are we to redefine the relationship between historical knowledge and agency, and the possibilities of real transformations in the world, once we have acknowledged the two 'facts' of historical writing? – its dependence on a social place, as De Certeau would say, from which the legitimacy of historical interpretation springs, that is, academia or professional historiography, and its dependence on discourse, the poetic and performative role of language, as a tool – but not an easy one to handle.

Returning to Scott, she tells us that efforts in the 1990s to rebuild ties to political activism have foundered, but she also believes that the supposed opposition between academic and political feminism has always been a mischaracterization. Rather than the alleged retreat of feminist scholars to 'ivory towers,' she considers that the reason behind that failure is the fragmentation of the political movement itself into specific areas of activism. However, against any claim that feminism is dead, Scott (2011, 27) maintains that 'Discontinuous, individually coordinated strategic operations with other groups have replaced a continuous struggle on behalf of women represented as a singular identity.' Moreover, she believes that for a younger generation discontinuity and dispersed strategic operations have become a familiar and eminently political way of operating. Yet, the 'loss of the continuity that came with the notion of history as inevitably progressive helps explain the difficulty an older generation has in imagining a future' (2011, 27). This highlights an interesting point: Scott takes this change to be due to the loss of the grand teleological narrative of emancipation that informed feminism. It was that grand narrative that allowed feminists to expect cumulative effects of their efforts, to see freedom and equality as 'inevitable

outcomes of human struggle,' outcomes that gave coherence to their actions and defined them as participants in a progressive movement.

Feminism's success in achieving academic acceptance and a legitimate claim to knowledge production, although empowered by that teleological grand narrative, finds itself unable to imagine its future with the loss of validity of any grand narrative. Scott, however, is not satisfied with presenting this diagnosis: she wants to offer a way to imagine a future for feminism. Summing up an interesting argument, her strategy is to convince readers – other feminist scholars, mostly – that this difficulty in thinking the future is a symptom of melancholy towards the idealized past of feminist scholars as revolutionaries. She claims that what has been lost is 'the satisfying cohesiveness of the movement – women as subjects and objects of their own history' (Scott 2011, 32) since, having acknowledged differences among women to be axiomatic, the scholarship that is now produced is no longer uniquely focused on women as a singular category.¹⁰ But because her aim is to foster imagination concerning feminism's future, Scott casts doubt on the cohesiveness that feminist scholarship thinks it had and claims that this view may, instead, have been retrospectively imposed on a diverse set of feminist positions. If we accept her interpretation, the difficulty in imagining a future comes to involve a melancholy for a cohesiveness that may never in fact have existed. It may well be, argues Scott, that our sense that we already know what feminist history is blocks the 'inspired arousal that is precisely an encounter with the unknown' (2011, 33). Letting go of that melancholy, she proposes, will lead to understanding feminism as a critical activity, a 'relentless interrogation of the taken-for-granted,' moved by desire towards the yet-to-know, from object to object, from present to future: 'What if we rewrote feminism's history as the story of a circulating critical passion, slipping metonymically along a chain of contiguous objects, alighting for a while in an unexpected place, accomplishing a task, and then moving on?' (Scott 2011, 33)

Scott's attempt to reimagine a future follows this route of restating feminism's desire: she claims this desire is best understood as 'a doubly subversive critical engagement, both with prevailing normative codes of gender and with the conventions and – since history's formation as a discipline in the late nineteenth century – rules of historical writing' (2011, 33). Scott asks us to see feminism as a mutable endeavor, 'a flexible strategic instrument not bound to any orthodoxy.' And, almost as if she were foreseeing the argument of this paper, she claims:

The production of knowledge about the past, although crucial, has not been an end in itself but rather – at certain moments, and not always in the service of an organized political movement – has provided the substantive terms for a critical operation that uses the past to disrupt the certainties of the present and so opens the way to imagining a different future. This critical operation is the dynamic that drives feminism. (Scott 2011, 34)¹¹

We might also say that this is the same drive that White hopes historical writing in general would discover. It is hard not to see the similarities between Scott's call for a feminism that embraces an open future and White's call for a historiography that embraces its poetic abilities. But I want to make a stronger claim: what White and Scott are also doing is *rewriting the history of their disciplines* to transform and empower them. In my view, *The Practical Past* continues the rewriting of historical studies' history that *Metahistory* and all of White's work has carried out: a new history that points at the necessary relationship – in virtue of their common origin – between historical writing, rhetoric and literature for imagining and endowing reality with meaning. Scott is similarly rewriting the history of feminism's history by challenging the highly selective story of 'those accounts that insist that women are, have been, and must ever be the sole subject or object of feminist history', which obscures the dynamic that makes thinking the future possible. She re-emplots feminism's history to keep 'the feminist critical spirit' alive, and to let the 'feminist critical desire keep on moving' (Scott 2011, 40). Scott is rewriting feminism's history, on the one hand, by claiming that the romantic narrative feminism has told about itself as a cohesive movement united by a common notion of womanhood was a retrospective imposition that excluded a more dynamic and diverse experience of both the social and the academic movements; and, on the other, by offering a new narrative (a satire?) of feminism as a critical desire that is not discouraged but nurtured by the unknown. I believe that this discursive strategy aimed at invigorating feminism's present and moving it out of melancholy to discover a renewed desire tell us something of the value of narrative *and* academic history to contribute to positive change in the social world.

Conclusion

For me, White's provocative rejection of the historical – academically constructed – past is symptomatic of a question, a doubt that haunts contemporary humanities: do we still have something to offer to the transformation of social life? Tired of waiting for the historical profession at large to embrace this question, White escapes to literature and the practical past to say: Yes, we have something to offer. This *something* involves history if we understand history as the task of building *interpretations* of the past *as tools* for a better future. And, because it has to do with rethinking how the past, present and future can be reconnected in some kind of practical or political program, in my opinion what needs, in the end, to be recast is not the relationship between a historical versus a practical past, but the relationship between academic and political practice.

If the humanities are to offer something, it might well be critical thinking built on thorough research and theorization. This was what feminist theorists aimed at providing. And this must now be recast in some way.¹² Although

White's romanticizing of the practical past may inspire us, there is at least one problem: there is nothing in the practical past understood as 'notions people have in everyday life' that can prevent its user from appealing to the most oppressive stereotypes or exclusionary narratives to solve his or her problem – a point made by Gabrielle Spiegel in her reflection on White's distinction (Cf. Spiegel 2013, 504). Not every solution to a social issue is in itself an ethically good or acceptable solution. For example, faced with the issue of women rejecting their traditional inferior roles, a society may respond by accepting this rejection and promoting equal opportunities or it can by reinstating male chauvinist violence to make women again accept their oppressed status. What I am trying to say is that without returning to the old – and well-criticized – paternalist idea of academia as offering enlightenment to the laity, many of us have found, in our journey through higher education, alternative narratives for who we were supposed to be in a male-dominated society as well as strong arguments for legitimately choosing them. So maybe there is still something that a humanist education has to offer.

Not just *any* use of the practical past would be right, then. Moreover, some experiences of the social world are experiences of a place in which one feels uncomfortable and oppressed – a place that comes with a horizon of expectations regarding what one can or cannot do that may be a cause of sheer anguish. That horizon of expectations may be framed by a potentially *oppressive* practical past that we did not choose but was received 'in everyday life.' In the case of women's oppression, criticizing the naturalized and unjust practical pasts that constitute their facticity has been the aim of feminism and particularly, of feminist history. This task involved a double movement: showing the contingent status of the received practical past and offering a new empowering narrative of women present and future possibilities.

Then, there is something slippery in relying too readily on any practical past as 'notions in everyday life.' We need a narrative to choose a past and envision 'a future to inherit, rather than one to endure,' as White tells us regarding the practical past (Domanska 2008, 19); but we also need a narrative constructed from a critical stand-point with regard to how 'those notions we draw on to solve our present situation' may reproduce the oppression of our present situation. We can see this in White and Scott: in order to offer the strong criticism that both of them offer, they also provide a new narrative of the past of their disciplines. Thus, we cannot imagine any future without rewriting or renarrating the past. Some narration of the past from the present is needed to move ourselves into the future. But 'some' is not the same as 'any': oppression, inequalities and injustice in the present require a critical narration for us to be able to move toward a better – and not just any – future. We need the destructive power of criticism and the constructive power of narrative. These are not easy-to-handle potencies, but they work hand-in-hand in imagining social change and futures to be desired. Feminist history broke the male-dominated

status quo by rewriting the past, by claiming that another version of history was possible. We have seen, through Scott's account, the limits those original narratives of women's history met and the internal criticism the whole project has undergone. As White has shown, since there can be no narrativizing without moralizing effects, a continuous critical revision of the constitutive narratives of our social life is needed (White 1987, 1–25). However, moralizing effects can serve to legitimate the status quo or function as profound criticism, that is, narratives can work to reproduce inequality as well as fight it. White's critical reflection revealed that narrativization is never ideologically neutral: it is an instrument not easy to handle. But once we break the horizon of expectation that was part of a narrative legitimizing an oppressive present, an *alternative* narrative of the past is all we have for imagining the future.

Following from her reflection on White's preference for the practical past, Gabrielle Spiegel concludes:

I agree with White that the greatest issue facing the practice of history today is to understand its relationship to ethical goals long banished from professional historiography. In the end, what is at stake in these discussions is not an epistemological question of 'truth' but an ethical response to the catastrophes of the last century and, in a more general sense, a turn from epistemological to ethical commitments in the study of the past, creating a place (and a plea) for a new historical ethics that need not – and probably cannot and should not – mean abandoning the search for evidence, the responsibility to seek to 'get it right' in our investigations of the past, or the insistence on a critical approach to knowledge in all its manifest forms as the fundamental practice of the historian. For the last 40 years and more, White has sought to bend that practice to human needs and aspirations. No one has argued more forcefully for an ethically responsible and morally meaningful approach to the past. But I would make the plea that this should take place within our historical practice, rather than in the choice of a practical past. (Spiegel 2013, 505)

I agree with Spiegel that abandoning the historical profession completely may be not be the best solution – if for no other reason than for the power position the discipline still holds as the legitimate voice of historical interpretation. But 'the body' of this 'voice' cannot remain the same – and that is the source of White's pessimism.

What is still needed is a transformation that would optimistically render the pessimistic opposition between a historical past and a practical past useless. After all, what is the value of history for life but that of being *all we have* for understanding ourselves in a post-metaphysical world?¹³ This may look like the kind of radical transformation that feminist historians pretended to effect for history. It may even be an interdisciplinary endeavor.¹⁴ We cannot know yet. So perhaps an appropriate end for this article would be a question to help us envision such needed transformation: *have we really overcome the idea of history as the story of man's heroism, the affirmation of an exclusive male agency?*

Notes

1. Cf. Ankersmit, Domanska, and Kellner (2009); Doran (2010, 2013); Kansteiner (2006, 2009); La Greca (2014a, 2014b); Partner (2009); Paul (2011); Tozzi (2009). Gabrielle Spiegel correctly recalls that the influence of existentialism in White's work was first pointed out by Kellner (1980). (Cf. Spiegel 2013).
2. Some examples of this kind of criticism of his work may be found in Golob (1980); Hobart (1989); Mandelbaum (1980); Marwick (1995); Norman (1991); Pomper (1980).
3. Gabrielle Spiegel provides a useful analysis of Oakeshott's original distinction in Spiegel (2013), 502. For another critical assessment of White's use of these notions, see Lorenz (2014).
4. In Domanska (2008), 18, White claims that a progressive historiography would be interested in the practical past.
5. I am not claiming that the feminist debate over the universality or not of the category of women can be accurately reconstructed as following the four master tropes (although I confess it is a hypothesis that I may want to test in the future). What I want to show is rather that the feminist debate has been, in part a least, a debate on *how to name* or *how to describe* the relationships between women depending on the degrees of similarities and differences between the entities and relationship between entities of the historical field (women's history). This issue is what White analyzed in *Metahistory* as the question of prefiguration in the historical work.
6. For an interesting approach regarding this idea of progressive historiography as relating Hayden White to 'liberation historiography,' see Domanska (2015).
7. This is a controversial claim shared by several feminist intellectuals. An almost paradigmatic example of debate over this issue can be found in Butler and Scott (1992).
8. For a different view on contemporary feminist history as failing to remain a kind of 'oppositional history' (that engages Scott's work also as I do), see Pihlainen (2011).
9. Spiegel (2013) also reads this final rejection of historiography in White's latest work.
10. Regarding the contemporary discussion on this issue, Scott adds: 'Now a received disciplinary category, gender is being critically examined by the next wave of feminists and others, who rightly insist that it is only one of several equally relevant axes of difference. Sex doesn't subsume race, ethnicity, nationality, or sexuality; this attributions of identity intersect in ways that need to be specified. To restrict our view to sexual difference is thus to miss the always complex ways in which relations of power are signified by *differences*. The newly safe terrain of gender and women's history is now itself defamiliarized, as queer, postcolonial, and ethnic studies (among other fields) challenge us to push the boundaries of our knowledge, to slide or leap metonymically to contiguous domains' (Scott 2011, 36–37). This issue is related to what Scott (2011, 40) calls 'feminist scholarship's hallmark': interdisciplinarity.
11. Scott also claims that this new way of thinking the history of feminism's history 'detaches it from its origins in Enlightenment teleologies and the utopian promise of complete emancipation.' (2011, 35) For an opposite stand on the relevance of its origins in the Enlightenment for feminism's history and present, see Amorós (1999).
12. An interesting contemporary attempt to rethink the humanities' relevance to political and social debates in the public sphere can be found in Butler (2004).

13. This is a point repeatedly made by Hayden White.
14. See note 10.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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