

Althusser's Influence on Hayden White's Philosophy of History

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Abstract: *Hayden White is one of the most famous contemporary historical philosophers, whose influence extends to many disciplines such as philosophy, history, and literary theory, he has repeatedly described himself as a Marxist, emphasizing that he is "a Marxist in the Althusser sense". By examining and comparing the theories of Hayden White and Althusser, this paper probes into the origin of Hayden White's thought and Althusser's, including the application of structuralism methods, ideological theory borrowing. At the same time, White kept consistent with Althusser in his attention and criticism of ideological issues, and expanded Althusser's ideological theory through the analysis of the development process and nature of history.*

Keywords: *narrative; history; structuralism; ideology*

1. Introduction

Hayden White is a famous American historical philosopher. He published his magnum opus *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* in the 1970s, and almost by himself promoted the "linguistic turn" of philosophy of history. With the help of the latest achievements of many disciplines, including philosophy and literary theory, he created the narrative philosophy of history, which greatly promoted the development of the discipline. At the same time, White has repeatedly stated his political leanings in public, stating in an interview with Ewa domanska: "I always regarded myself as a kind of Marxist. And I am politically a socialist, I always have been"[1]. At International historical conference in November 2007, he described himself as a Marxist in the sense of Althusser. As we all know, French philosopher Althusser reinterpreted Marxism with the structuralist method in the 1960s, which aroused wide attention and was regarded as one of the representatives of structuralism, and people also regarded him as the founder and representative of structuralist Marxism. Why did White call himself a "Marxist in the Althusser sense"? What does White's theory have to do with Althusser? We can get a glimpse of White's theory by examining it and comparing it with Althusser's theory.

2. Symptomatic reading method

Hayden White once said in the preface to *Metahistory* that this book is a work of the "structuralist" era, and White's narrative philosophy of history is actually based on the structuralist analysis of historical works. Through structural analysis of historical texts, he breaks through the surface structure of texts and finds out the deep structure of texts, so as to make a complete and new interpretation of the text and the author's thoughts. This structuralist approach is closely related to Althusser's symptomatic reading method.

In 1956, Khrushchev made a secret report criticizing Stalin at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which caused a shock throughout the socialist camp and was a huge blow to the international communist movement. With the collapse of Stalinism, both Soviet Marxism and Western Marxism began to rethink Marxism, and there was a fierce debate in the ideological circle about how to understand Marx. But the result of the debate was that both Soviet Marxism and Western Marxism began to lean towards humanitarianism. Althusser was keenly aware that Marxism was in danger of being distorted in this current of thought. In response, Althusser published in *Defense of Marx* in 1965. He wanted to defend the "mature Marx" which is going to be replaced by the "young Marx", the first task was to go back to the text of Marx. So how do we interpret Marx's text? Althusser borrowed Strauss' structuralism and Freudian psychoanalysis, and proposed a "symptomatic reading method" which is different from direct reading method.

What is "symptomatic reading method"? Althusser believed that the object of reading is text, that is, paragraphs, articles, and books composed according to grammatical rules. While traditional direct reading focuses only on the surface meaning of the text, "symptomatic reading method" advocates starting with symptoms (such as silence, blanks, errors, omissions) in the text to reveal the deep structure of the author's theory. This structure determines the author's writing, and only by examining this deep structure can we understand the author's overall thought. Therefore, according to this "symptomatic reading method", Althusser divided the text as the object of reading into two structures - surface structure and deep structure. The surface structure is the literal meaning of the text, while the deep structure determines the writer's consciousness and writing, as well as the ideas to be expressed.

Hayden White, as a historical philosopher, was actually thinking about historical epistemology at that time, and he continued Croce and Collingwood's reflection on history. But instead of limiting his thinking to purely theoretical discussions, as his predecessors had done, he focused on historical practice. The most powerful way to investigate the practice of history is to start with the practice results of history -- historical text. In his *Metahistory*, White analyzed the classic works of eight historians and historical philosophers. He basically drew on Althusser's symptomatic reading method, and used the structuralist method to divide historical works into explicit structures and implicit structures. He thinks that historical works generally have five levels: chronicle; story; mode of emplotment; mode of argument; mode of ideological implication. Chronicle and story are the most basic "primitive elements", the chronological arrangement of historical events constitutes the chronicle, the historical events in the chronicle can be further arranged into fixed scenes or processes (such as beginning, transition, end), become a part of a story. However, it is not enough for historical works to have stories alone. At the same time, it is necessary to explain and analyze historical events. Therefore, it is necessary to give stories a plot structure to complete the explanation of events, which is the third level -- mode of emplotment. White draws on Northrop Frye's theory and sets up four modes of emplotment: Romance, Tragedy, Comedy and Satire. The author historical events can be moulded into the story of the above four models for certain explanation effect, and give meaning to historical events.

Historians may also need to explain the "the point of it all" or "what it all adds up to" of historical events and explore the reasons for the occurrence of historical events. At this time, a theoretical reasoning is needed to explain historical events. This is the fourth level of the historical work-- mode of argument. White identified four forms of argument in the historical works he analyzed: Formist, Organicist, Mechanistic, and Contextualist. These four modes of argument can all provide arguments and corresponding explanations for the historical events in the narrative. On the basis of "mode of emplotment" and "mode of argumen", historians tend to hold a political stance when explaining historical events, and this stance reflects the ideological dimension of historians. "Just as every ideology is attended by a specific idea of history and its processes, so too, I maintain, is every idea of history attended by specifically determinable ideological implications" [2]. Since the 19th century, history has sought to call itself an independent science, hoping to describe historical events objectively and neutrally. But in White's opinion, "there does, in fact, appear to be an irreducible ideological component in every historical account of reality"[3]. White distinguishes four basic ideological positions that historians may choose, following the theories of Karl Mannheim: Anarchism, Conservatism, Radicalism, and Liberalism.

We can see that there are four different options for each of the last three modes of interpretation. The permutations and combinations of different interpretive strategies constitute the distinctive style of the historian's work, but this is only the explicit structure of the historical text. It is the hidden structure of historical works, in fact Althusser's deep structure, that really determines the explanation and argument that historians choose. This deep structure, according to Hayden White, is the basis on which historians choose their mode of interpretation. Before writing, the historian first prefigure the relevant historical materials into an "object of mental perception" in his mind. Then, on the basis of this, historians will choose relevant explanatory strategies to explain the status and category of each element; the relationship between them; and what happens when the relationship changes. "In the poetic act which precedes the formal analysis of the field, the historian both creates his object of analysis and predetermines the modality of the conceptual strategies he will use to explain it"[4]. Because this prefigurative act is accepted without criticism in the minds of historians, it is a pre-logical and pre-cognitive behavior, so it is also called "poetic prefigure" by White. Since this kind of prefigurative act is a kind of poetic behavior, White uses poetics and modern language theory to identify four basic tropes for poetic prefigure: Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche and Irony. The theory of poetic prefigure is White's major theoretical discovery. In his structuralist analysis of historical texts, White found that before any historian practiced history, he already had a certain view of history or world view in his mind, and this view of history or world view always dominated the practice of historians. This particular idea is actually the historian's understanding of the historical noumenon. The quadruple metaphor of poetic prefigure reflects how

historians understand history itself, and also determines their choice of different interpretative strategies, which is the basis of what White calls "meta-historiography", that is, the deep structure of Althusser.

3. Ideological theory

Hayden White found the "metahistory" basis of historians through the structural analysis of historical works, what determines the choice of interpretation strategies and the overall style of historical works is the specific historical view in historians' mind, the basis of this view of history is either aesthetic or ethical, and for White, each view of history is accompanied by a particular and definite ideological implication." In this view White concludes that history's goal of "becoming a science" in the 19th and 20th centuries was impossible. Objectively reflecting history and turning history into a science is only one of the historical views in the minds of historians, which does not have natural authority and superiority. At the same time, through the investigation of the development of modern history, White found that history could not be as "wie es eigentlich gewesen" as Leopold Von Ranke pursued. The professionalization and academicity of history is actually synchronized with the nation-state and the bourgeoisie seizing the political power. In the capitalist society, the real function of history is actually a kind of ideology.

Ideology has always been the focus of Althusser's field, and his series of works have explored the nature and function of ideology. In *Pour Marx*, Althusser criticizes humanism, regards humanism as an ideology, and preliminarily expounds his ideological theory. He believed that Marxism was a science and humanism was a bourgeois ideology.

According to Althusser, ideology is "a system of representations (images, myths, ideas, or concepts) with a unique logic and a unique structure." Ideology differs from science because the function of science is cognitive, while ideology emphasizes practical and social functions. In Althusser's theory, ideology is a basic structure of society and plays an important role in human history, as a kind of social structure, it affects people all the time, and its main way is to appear in the form of a cultural object, which is perceived and accepted by people, and affects and acts on people in their unconscious state. Hayden White's inquiry into the function of history is actually an extension of Althusser's ideological problem. One of the things White has always wondered is why countries and social groups pay people to study the past? What is the social function of studying the past? White, who asked about this question, borrowed Althusser's theory. White believed that history was not a science, but its practical and social functions made it a form of ideology. The reason why history has established research norms and become an independent discipline in modern times is actually to meet the needs of bourgeois values and political power. "The social function of a properly disciplined study of history and the political interests it served at its inception in the early nineteenth century, the period of the consolidation of the (bourgeois) nation state, are well-known and hardly in need of documentation. We do not have to impute dark ideological motives to those who endow history with the authority of discipline in order to recognize the ideological benefits to new social classes and political constituencies that professional, academic historiography served and *mutatis mutandis*, continues to serve down to our own time "[5].

In Althusser's view, this experiential relationship of man to the world, including history, is not only realized through ideology, but even this relationship is ideology itself. People do not know and experience the world and history directly, but through ideology. Ideology is given an ontological status by Althusser, and the emergence of narrative entities in White's later theory is actually a variant of Althusser's ideology. The two forms are different, but the function is the same, both are to maintain the dominance of the ruling class, Althusser speaks of the role of ideology: it not only helps the ruling class to rule the exploited class, but also causes the ruling class to accept the attachment it experiences to the world as a real and reasonable relation, thus constituting the ruling class itself.

And White also said: "Historiography is, by its very nature, the representational practice best suited to the production of 'law-abiding' citizen"[6]. Because the most common form of representation used in history is narrative, and narrative, as a means of representation, is particularly suitable for creating ideas of continuity, wholeness, closure, and individuality, and these ideas are characteristic of every civilized society, especially bourgeois society. At this point, the role of historiography is consistent with the role of AIE emphasized by Althusser, whose fundamental aim is the reproduction of the relations of production. Althusser argues that it is precisely in capitalist society where AIE inculcates the ideology of the ruling class to the ruled class through various forms of non-violence that the relations of production of capitalist social forms (the relations of the exploited to the exploiters and of the exploiters to the exploited) are reproduced on a large scale.

4. History as ideology

So how does history as ideology function concretely? Althusser further developed his understanding of the concept of "ideology" in his later reflections. He makes two arguments: first, ideology has no history, and although ideologies have their own histories, as an eternal function and structure, it becomes a non-historical reality, a reality that records the omnipresence of history; Second, as an expression of the imagined relationship between the individual and his real conditions of existence, ideology also has a material existence. The traditional idea is that ideology is the distortion or imagination of the real world (the real living conditions in which people live), but after Althusser's argument, people in ideology is not the real world and the real living conditions, but their relationship with the real world and the real living conditions. It is not ideology that distorts the real world, but that it imagines or distorts man's relation to the conditions of existence, that is, to the relations of production and those from which they are derived.

In Althusser's view, this thought relationship has a material existence. First of all, from the argument of AIE, we can see that ideology must rely on some kind of machine to play its role, and it exists in the practice of this machine, and this existence is actually the existence of material; secondly, when ideology acts on individuals, it creates a "subject", which accepts the ideas created by ideology and spontaneously puts them into his material practice. Ideology actually exists in the behavior of human subjects. So Althusser said: As far as a single subject (an individual) is concerned, the ideas he believes in have a material existence, because his ideas are his material acts, which are embedded in material practices, which are governed by material rituals, and which are not. And these rituals are themselves dictated by the material ideological machinery from which the idea of the subject arises. So Althusser finally came to his conclusion that ideology summons the individual as the subject.

In Althusser's view, the subject is the basic category that constitutes all ideologies, and no ideology can be without the subject. There is no ideology that does not exist for the sake of the subject, and all ideologies function through the practice of the subject. Ideology fulfils its specific function by "constituting" or "summoning" specific individuals as subjects.

Hayden White's research on the development process of history proves that history has an ideological role. On this basis, he further draws on Althusser's theory and deeply discusses the role of history in AIE. White takes Droysen as an example, arguing that Droysen's *Historik* can be seen as a textbook for the production of bourgeois ideology in the post-industrial era. According to White, the purpose of history in capitalist society is to cultivate a reading subject that can identify with the society in which it lives. This society appears politically as a modern nation-state and economically as an integral part of globalized trade. History does not need to instill certain economic or political beliefs to readers in the contemporary era. Its function, like literature and art, is to make readers become a reading subject, which is the same thing as Althusser's "ideology summons the individual as the subject".

But history, in White's view, has an advantage over literature and art because it presents the "real," what really happened. Unlike literature and art, which present "fictional" content. But this representation and interpretation of "reality" is explained through a mode of "past" interpretation. Thus history is knowable and unknowable to the reader, because it is recorded and reproduced, but we have no way of comparing it, because it has passed away; both present and absent, because we have come from the past, but there is no way back; It's both familiar and strange, because it's our experiences that make us who we are, but we're so far removed from our past. So history offers the reader a scene that has a fixed order, but allows free imagination. This kind of free imagination is actually a kind of subjectivity, which in turn creates a kind of reading subject. When reading historical works and experiencing history, the reading subject does not realize that everything is given. On the contrary, he thinks that he has judgment criteria and free choice, but in fact, the free choice of the subject is limited and the judgment criteria are provided by social norms. Historical representation can create in the subject a sense of reality, which can be used as a criterion for determining what counts as reality in his own present. Historians can use narrative and other historical representation means to make the reading subject to agree with everything that exists. At the same time, the practical function of history makes it a discourse that empowers the reader in a moral sphere that is real to them, a "reality" that limits their vision and is the guarantee of their conscience, of their justice, and which, if breached, means that they have lost their conscience and their humanity. From this, we can see that White's description of the ideological function of history is basically in line with Althusser's theory, especially the identification and absolute guarantee among the four links.

5. Conclusion

After the above investigation and comparison, we find that White, as a "Marxist of Althusser's style", does draw on a lot of Althusser's thoughts in his theory. Like Althusser, he writes in an activist voice. His revelation and criticism of the ideological function of history made him stand in the same trench with Marx and Althusser. Althusser emphasized that the issue of "ideological" leadership in the field of theory is the core issue of philosophical practice, and White expressed it with action, which is also the core issue of historical practice!

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