The Resurrection of Historicism?
'A critical analysis on Neo-Historicism and its relation to the suppos antecedent historiographical movement of Historicism'

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Synopsis

The focus of this essay is to identify and analyse whether or not Neo-Historicism is a revival of Historicism. Initially the focus of this essay was on the emergence of Neo-Historicism within the field of historiography, however, upon reading a passage from Keith Windschuttle's, 'The Killing of History', and through further investigation, it was apparent that several historians held to the notion that Neo-Historicism is a 'resurrection' of Historicism. Intrigued by this, the focus of the essay was henceforth adapted to critically analyse the claim that Neo-Historicism is a revival of Historicism. In addition to this, the essay contains a second component in which it critically analyses the practice of Neo-Historicism within the field of historiography.

In order to assess whether Neo-Historicism is the revival of Historicism the essay identifies the differences between the two movements and analyses the various influences inherent within Neo-Historicism. Both historiographical critics and Neo-Historicists were used to substantiate the investigation and analysis.

To determine the merit of the movement's practice within the field of historiography, an analysis of two significant Neo-Historicists, Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose, was undertaken.

The historical investigation undertaken found that Neo-Historicism was not a revival of Historicism; rather it was an amalgamation of various historiographical movements. This was evident through an identification of the Neo-Historicist method of contextualisation, its subject matter and specific stance towards a historian's ability to access eternal truths through history. Historians such as Windschuttle had made the link between Historicism and Neo-Historicism because of its titular reference and the fact that the movements both held an importance on contextualisation as central to its histories. In reality there is a disparity in the two movements' methods of contextualisation, as Neo-Historicism is predominantly influenced by Post-Modernism and Neo-Marxism than it is Historicism. Through an analysis of Neo-Historicist histories and their critiques, it was evident that there are also weaknesses within the practice of Neo-Historicism.

Essay

Neo-Historicism, despite its titular reference, is not as one would assume the revival of the historiographical movement of Historicism, though there are influences. The movement of Neo-Historicism which emerged in the 1980's is relatively nebulous. Historicism, a movement that originated within Germany in the nineteenth century, influenced Neo-Historicism in the focus on contextualisation, which has led literary critics to make a link between Historicism and Neo-Historicism as if the latter were reviving the former. However, through Foucauldian and Gramscian influences the Neo-Historicist method of contextualisation is dissimilar to that of Historicism. In addition to this, Neo-Historicist subject matter and its belief that a historian is unable to access eternal truths through the past is also in contradistinction to Historicism. Within Neo-Historicism there are evident influences of Post-Modernism and Neo-Marxism and thus a complete revival of Historicism is tenuous. Neo-Historicist texts and the critiques laid upon them concurrently substantiate this notion as well as identifying the weakness in Neo-Historicist histories. Hence, Neo-Historicism is not a complete revival of Historicism because it is influenced by an amalgamation of various historiographical movements, rather than just Historicism.
The historiographical practice of Neo-Historicism emerged in the 1980's within American Academic institutions. As a movement, Neo-Historicism is difficult to define due to its multivalent character. Stephen Greenblatt offers a rather nebulous description of Neo-Historicism as being a practice which was set apart from the dominant historical scholarship of the past and later states that there was in fact no doctrine at all. Louis Montrose corroborates this notion that Neo-Historicists are, “Actually quite heterogeneous in their critical practices.” This grants a legitimisation of the claim that Neo-Historicists’ only unifying thread is their agreement that they have no unifying thread.

Peter Hohendahl, a decade later, possessing the benefit of retrospection to study Neo-Historicist texts, states that their agenda is to allow conflicting readings whilst embracing heterogeneity. Despite the apparent heterogeneous nature of Neo-Historicism, Veesser adequately binds the movement together through an analysis of the focal tenets inherent within the majority of Neo-Historicist texts. Firstly, there is an importance placed on contextualisation through an analysis of the text’s discourse and the power relations that influence it, evidently an influence of both Foucault and Gramsci. Secondly, Neo-Historicists believe that a historian may not access eternal truths through the past. Thirdly, the subject matter of Neo-Historicism is relatively constant as there is a predominant trend to analyse literature in the field of Renaissance Studies. Hence, Neo-Historicism is a movement that cannot easily or clearly be defined, yet through an analysis of its influences and the tenets that recur throughout the movement’s texts, the extent to which it is a resurrection of Historicism will become evident.

In order to analyse the validity of the claim that Neo-Historicism is a revival of Historicism, an understanding of the practice’s supposed antecedent ideology is vital. Historicism is best defined as a critical movement insisting on the prime importance of historical context to the interpretation of history that claims no vantage point for judging an historical event. This necessity to situate history in its context is secular hermeneutical as the individual primary evidence is relative to its immediate milieu and thus a historian transcends their own context and bias to study the context of the primary evidence. Historicism’s formation was due to nineteenth-century German historians that sought out a historiographical approach as a reaction against the universalism of Enlightenment. Iggers notes the first use of the term was in 1797 by Friedrich Schlegel who notes that Winkelman’s placing of importance on the immeasurable distinctness and unique nature of antiquity had created a new era. By the 19th Century Leopold Von Ranke, without attaching himself to the label of a historicist, had developed methods that enabled Historicists a method to study history through ‘Quellenkritik’, an empiricist ideal of a strict presentation of facts, “To extinguish myself and only let the matter speak.” Hence, the supposed antecedent ideology of Neo-Historicism is one that held contextualisation and the withholding of bias as imperative to history.

The cohesive similarities between Historicism and Neo-Historicism identify the influences of the former upon the latter. Dwight Hoover states that the principles of Neo-Historicism resemble those of Historicism, as they both hold that different societies vary so much in cultural assumptions that a phenomenon in one cannot be held to be continuous with that in another, and as a consequence a focus on contextualisation is imperative. This is further evident through Veesser’s identification that Neo-historicism assumes, “That every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices.” Wesley advocates Heilman’s opinion that essential lineaments of Historicism appear in Neo-Historicism. Keith Windschuttle claims that not only does Neo-Historicism contain inherent influences of Historicism; it is actually a revival of Historicism. This ‘revival’ as Windschuttle puts it, would indicate that its relation to Historicism was to resurrect it and continue the practice.

Despite the favour for Neo-Historicism to be a revival of Historicism by the historians noted above, it is evident that although there is a tie, the notion of a complete revival is tenuous. The first disparity between Historicism and Neo-Historicism is that the subject matter of Historicism observes historical events, individuals and primary evidence as opposed to Neo-Historicism which isolates its subject matter to literary texts. The second disparity being that Neo-Historicists believe a historian cannot access truths from history, which is in contradistinction to Historicism. Hohendahl states that Greenblatt and Montrose, two instigators of Neo-Historicism, have hailed the movement of Neo-Historicism as a methodological ‘Kehne’ steering literary criticism away from the formalism and positivism of the old Historicism that believed it could access truths through the past. Greenblatt himself states that, “Most of the writing labelled New-Historicist, and certainly my own work, has set itself resolutely against
these positions. Neo-Historicists are in opposition to Historicists who upheld a quasi-positivist belief in the objectivity and the unproblematic representability of the historical past and as Lerner states, “To the old historicist the past is unproblematically accessible; but the radical sceptic [Neo-Historicists], seeing the past as a text subject to constant reinterpretation, may want to question its knowability.” Neo-Historicists therefore set themselves resolutely against an historian’s ability to access truth through history. Hence, the subject matter of Neo-Historicists and their stance towards an historian’s ability to access truth through the past, or lack thereof, is an evident digression from Historicism. Although within Neo-historicism there are influences of Historicism, such as the importance of contextualisation, it is not identical as the contextualisation is different in nature due to the Neo-Historicist’s utilisation of Foucault’s discourse theory, as opposed to the concrete historical context within Historicism.

Neo-Historicism is predominantly influenced by Post-Modernism rather than Historicism. Catherine Belsey, in favour of the movement states that, “[A]t its most brilliant, it’s most elegant, Neo-Historicism is characteristically Post-Modern.” Post-Modern influences are evident in the Neo-Historicist stance towards a historian’s access to truth, or lack thereof, as noted above. Neo-Historicists argue that there is no universal meaning or truth in history, and that despite an analysis on the context and milieu of a text, historians are unable to access unchanging truths. This concept pertains to Post-Modernism thought as anti-essentialist and anti-universalist. Thus, Neo-Historicists believe that a historian does not have an access to truth within history. This is in contradiction to Historicists who believe that the past is accessible, because, “New-Historicists, as staunch believers in poststructuralist theories of representation and signification, no longer could.” Pieter’s states that Neo-Historicists are furthermore opposed to Historicists who, “Reduced history to a single, massive monolith that left no room for the dissonant voices New-Historicists wanted to listen to.” More specifically Greenblatt rejects old Historicism as ‘monological’ as it is concerned with discovering a single political vision and also that it posits a coherent and consistent vision which can serve as a point of reference for literary interpretation. He states Neo-Historicisms intention as rather an exploration of, “Both the social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text.” This reaction and opposition to meta-narratives is also a concept inherent within Post-Modernism, and is evident within the Neo-Historicist histories of Stephen Greenblatt. Neo-Historicism is thus actually influenced more predominantly by Post-Modernism than it is Historicism, specifically in their belief that a historian may not access eternal truths from history.

A particularly prominent Post-Modern influence on Neo-Historicism was Michel Foucault. Foucault’s concepts have influenced Neo-Historicism in its method of contextualisation, and Brannigan defines Foucault, “As the most notable and pervasive influence on New-Historicism.” Foucault’s historiographical methodology stresses the heterogeneity of historical epochs or ‘discourses’. Hughes-Warrington in reference to ‘The Order of Discourse’ notes Foucault’s belief that the rules that shape what we think and do are in large part the product of power relations in society, and Weedon interprets Foucault’s observation of power as being a force within discourses that constitutes and governs individual subjects. As noted by Brannigan and Harpham, Foucault’s main influence has been the focus on the conjunction of power relations and knowledge and thus the influence of a discourse on literary texts. Foucault is hence seen to grant Neo-Historicists a method of examining the context of a text by way of interpreting its discourse and thus understanding the text as a product of power relations in society. Therefore, within Neo-Historicism there are distinct Foucauldian influences that impact upon their method of contextualisation that is in contradistinction to Historicist practices.

In addition to Foucauldian influences, Neo-Historicism is also influenced by Antonio Gramsci. As a Neo-Marxist, Gramsci expanded upon the Marxist theory of Hegemony. Bates succinctly defines Marx’s ‘Hegemony’ as, “Political leadership based on the consent of the led, a consent which is secured by the diffusion and popularisation of the world view of the ruling class.” Marx thought it a corollary of economic theory that, “The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class.” Yet, Gramsci utilised this theory and extended it into the cultural sphere to determine that the ruling classes maintained their position both via state coercion and the consent of civil society through culture, such as organised religion. The theory of Hegemony is utilised within Neo-Historicist work to analyse the power relations that influenced a text, and to identify the text’s
purpose for the ruling class producing the Cultural Hegemony, and thus enhances Neo-Historicism's method of contextualisation. Ergo, Gramsci's theory of Hegemony influences the Neo-Historicists' method of contextualisation, which substantiates the notion that Neo-Historicism is influenced more by alternative streams of historiographical thought, such as Neo-Marxism, than Historicism itself. This is evident within the texts of Neo-Historicist historians such as Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose.

Examining examples of Neo-Historicist history demonstrates the influences upon Neo-Historicism, and whether or not it is a revival of Historicism. Greenblatt, who is seen as the prominent proponent and instigator of Neo-Historicism developed in his seminal text, 'Shakespearean Negotiations,' a praxis of literary analysis that attempted to rediscover literary texts as both the reflection and the creation of a given historical context. Greenblatt wrote in reaction to historians who "Tend to posit two separate autonomous systems [language and society] and then try to gauge how accurately or effectively the one represents the other." His intention was to insist that because all cultures exist within language and society and that because every language and society are hegemonic systems, there is no possibility of resistance emerging unchecked by power. For Greenblatt, the only subversion enacted is to give an opportunity for power to justify itself. Power's pervasiveness is a shared assumption among Neo-Historicists, and is evident in Greenblatt's analysis of a report by Thomas Harriot in 1588. Harriot within his report records the 'alien voices' of the Algonkian Indians that believed the numerous deaths following the wake of European Imperialism and Colonisation were caused by 'invisible bullets'. Although this appears to be an opportunity for subaltern opinion, it was actually a, "Momentary sense of instability... produced by the power that ultimately denies the possibility of plenitude," and hence was created by the ruling class to suppress various voices, and just present one singular hegemonic voice. Inherent within Greenblatt's analysis is the influence of Gramsci, as he identifies the cultural hegemony of the discourse and its influence upon the text. Additionally there is the post-modern influence of being opposed to meta-narratives and rather seeking a polyphony of voices within the construction of history, reinforcing the notion that Post-Modernist and Neo-Marxist concepts have been more influential than Historicism in Neo-Historicism.

Another example of Neo-Historicism is that of Louis Montrose's analysis on, 'A Mid Summer Nights Dream,' in an attempt to identify the way in which the power relations within the discourse of the Elizabethan Era have shaped the literary text. He interprets the text as an ideological attempt to uphold the authority of males within Elizabethan culture by way of comprehending the power of Queen Elizabeth within its bounds, thus reading it as a text attempting to restore male governance. Within this method of analysis the literary text is interpreted as both the product and producer of history, in that it is the product of the hegemony of its discourse, yet the Neo-Historicist analysis offers a history in itself. Thus, through a study of Neo-Historicist practice, it is evident that although the importance laid on contextualisation is evident, the analysis of the context is different between the two movements. Historicists identify the societal context of an event, primary source, or personality in conjunction with an empiricist utilisation of evidence and facts, whereas Neo-Historicists identify a literary text as the product of power relations within a particular discourse per Foucault's theory of discourse and Gramsci's theory of Cultural Hegemony.

The critiques of Neo-Historicism also reveal whether Neo-Historicism is a revival of Historicism. Neo-Historicists are criticised for their relativist tendencies and a lack of empiricism. Dominick LaCapra critiques Neo-Historicism as containing a flair for 'over-contextualisation' and theoretical relativism. Though evidently biased, it highlights problems that Historicism has been similarly critiqued for, such as Hoover's claim that carrying Historicism to a logical extreme is self-destructive due to its potential relativism. This indicates that there are in fact inherent similarities within the two practices. Yet, the methods utilised by Montrose and Greenblatt as identified above have also been criticised for not adhering to an empiricist use of evidence which is in contradiction to a Historicist's adherence in their production of history. Montrose's method, as identified earlier, has been criticised on the notion that if one was to disagree with the original thesis of the historian then any evidence about the 'discursive practices of the age' will not persuade the responder. The use of quotes as evidence substantiates the thesis only on the basis that it is true. This thus brings forth the subjective and bias nature on the selection of evidence as it is determined by the historian, who also determines which quotes to omit. This is dissimilar to Historicism's utilisation.
of empiricist evidence that is not merely rooted in a hypothetical line of argument. Myer concludes in his critique of Neo-Historicism that, “Only if a reader of New-Historicist argument is prepared to accept its a priori assumptions can its conclusions be accepted as true to history.” One must accept that despite Neo-Historicism’s ability to bring forth interesting theses on texts in relation to their discourses, there is an extent to which their work is historically valuable as it relies heavily upon hypothetical speculation rather than empirical methods. Hence, the critiques reiterate the notion that although Neo-Historicism has been influenced by Historicism in the importance of contextualisation, more dominant influences were prevalent in formation of the movement’s purpose and methods.

Neo-Historicism is thus not a resurrection of the historiographical movement of Historicism, despite its inherent influences. When Keith Windschuttle stated that Neo-Historicism was a “revival” of Historicism he focused too predominantly on the similar importance placed on contextualisation between the two movements. Historicism, as a movement analysing the historical context of the past, influenced Neo-Historicism in its focus on contextualisation. Yet the analysis of contextualisation is evidently dissimilar as the Neo-Historicist utilises the Foucauldian Discourse theory to study the Cultural Hegemonic systems that influence the literary text, a la Gramsci, to formulate theses, evident within the histories of Greenblatt and Montrose. The two movements also digress in subject matter and the potential to access truth through history as Neo-Historicists solely study literary texts and believe that a historian is unable to access eternal truths though the past. Through an analysis of Neo-Historicist histories, it is evident that Neo-Historicism develops theses that are grounded on speculation, and lack empirical evidence and thus the movement’s practice contains inherent weaknesses. Ergo, Historicism is not the predominant influence of Neo-Historicism and the identification that Neo-Historicism is rather an amalgamation of various Historiographical movements strips bare the claim that it is a resurrection of Historicism.

Endnotes

2. Berkley University first produced Representations, a scholarly journal, in 1983, which is seen as the founding proponent and publication of Neo Historicism.
5. Ibid.
6. Alan Liu, Ibid.
9. Hoover states that this is due to the major proponents in the development of Neo-Historicism being rooted within Renaissance studies. Hoover, D. 1992, pp. 359-360.
11. Originally the science of interpreting Scripture, Secular Hermeneutics retains the idea of relating the individual work to a larger pattern to whose pattern it meaningfully fits.
13. Wesley, M. 1972, p.6. This is similarly emphasised by Hamilton's statement that Historicism’s emergence was, “In reaction to the practice of deducing from first principles, truths about how people are obliged to organise themselves socially and politically.” Hamilton, Op. cit. p.2
14. The critical study of sources.
21. A turning or bend.
22. Hohendahl, 1992, p.87
23. Montrose, L. 1986, p.16
25. Lerner, 1993, p.277
26. “No Discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths or expresses unalterable human nature.” Veeser, A. 1989, p.2
27. Belsey, C. 1991, p.29
29. Veeser, A. 1989, p.2
30. Essentialism is an approach to accessing history in which the past is held together via universal principles and that it is on the basis of those principles that the past can be understood; hence Anti-Essentialism is opposed to this practice. Ankersmit, F. 1989, p.148
31. Due to the multivalent character of Neo-Historicism not
all Neo-Historicists are actually poststructuralists.

32. Pieters, J. 2000, p.1
33. Pieters, ibid. pp.21-22
34. Greenblatt, S. 1982, p.5
35. Greenblatt, S. 1980, p.6
36. For analysis on Greenblatt see paragraph 9.
37. Foucault, though not seeking the identification of a Post-Modernist, holds beliefs associated with Post-Modernism such as Anti-Essentialism.
39. Pieters, J. 2000, p.28
40. Foucault, M. 1971, pp.48-79
41. Hughes-Warrington, M. 2000, p.96
42. Weedon, 1987, p.113
43. “For the New Historicism, 'history,' arising at the conjunction of power and knowledge is the focus of such an exercise.” Harpham, G. 1991, p.373. John Brannigan defined Neo-Historicism as a mode of critical interpretation which privileges power relations as the most important context for texts of all kinds, and which treats literary texts as a space where power relations are made visible. Brannigan, J. 1998, p.6
44. Foucault’s focus on context is emphasised in a lecture on Discourse in which he refers to the importance of contextualization in his own work: “There is also a mistaken interpretation according to which my analysis of a given problematization is without any historical context... In fact, however, I have tried to show, for instance, that the new problematization of illness or physical disease at the end of the 18th Century was directly linked to... the development of a new social reaction to diseases.” Foucault, M. 1983
46. Feuer, L. 1959, p.26
47. Marquior, J. 1986, pp.100
49. Derdzinski, M. 2001
50. Greenblatt, S. 1988, p.11
52. “A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia,” was instigated to entice potential investors into a colonial scheme in Virginia. Greenblatt, 1988, p.49
53. Subaltern in this context refers to the lower classes of society.
54. Greenblatt, S. 1988, p.50
55. It should be noted that Foucault did not place individuals or institutions behind power relations, and it is for this reason that they use his theories in conjunction with Gramsci’s theory of Cultural Hegemony.
56. Shakespeare, W. ‘A Mid Summer Night’s Dream.’ a fictional text written for the stage in the 1590’s.
58. Myers, D. 1988
59. LACapra. D. 1989, p.191
60. Holendahl states the bias is due to the polemic nature of LACapra’s critique. Holendahl, P. 1992, p.88
61. Hoover indicates that due to its potential for relativism, an absence of judgement on the past would be destructive. He states that few historians have ever been pure historicists as the belief of no universal standards of behaviour is dangerous, and consequently most historicists argue that there are in fact parameters that should be held as acceptable, and at the same time, hold to the notion that the best explanation for societies each being different was their historical experience. Hoover, D. 1992, pp.355-358
62. Myers, D. 1988
63. Myers, D. 1988

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Retirement of HTA Patron: Professor Brian Fletcher

Emeritus Professor Brian Fletcher is a distinguished historian who has taught at the University of Sydney and the University of NSW. He was Bicentennial Professor of Australian History and is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, the Royal Australian Historical Society and of the Federation of Australian Historical Societies. He has written a number of books on Australian history, including most recently Magnificent Obsession: The Story of the Mitchell Library and The Place of Anglicanism in Australia: Church Society and Nation.

Although Brian began his career as a secondary history teacher he was not given the opportunity to teach history in his first appointment and he ended up teaching mathematics in his second appointment at Drummoyne Boys’ High School. He was offered a teaching position at the University of Sydney just before third term began — and before he had to venture too far into algebra. Brian taught at the University of Sydney until 1959, at the University of NSW from 1960 to 1972, then returned to the University of Sydney where he worked until his retirement in 1999.

Brian has had a long association with secondary history teachers and with the History Teachers’ Association of NSW. He attended the early meetings of the newly formed association in the 1950s, he was a member of the association’s executive and editor of the journal Teaching History from 1976 to 1985. He considered this an important role, keeping teachers informed of syllabus developments and the latest research relating to syllabus topics. Brian became Patron of HTA NSW in 1990.

In the days of domestic marking of the Leaving Certificate Brian and his wife Beverly became experienced markers. Brian was an advocate of 19th century Australian history and the narrative approach to teaching history, especially in the junior school. In the senior years he was a champion of the Revolutions Option in the Modern History course. Brian served as chair of the Modern History syllabus committee and also as chief examiner.

We thank Brian for his many years of service to school history, to history teachers and to our association. We wish Brian and Beverly an enjoyable and satisfying retirement.

Kate Cameron