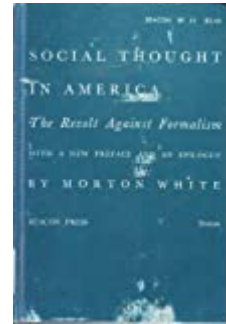




Morton White. *Social Thought in America: The Revolt Against Formalism.* New York: Viking, 1949. viii + 260 pp. \$6.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-519837-9.



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The Challenge of Morton White and the Politics of Antiformalism

Note: This review is part of the H-Ideas Retrospective Reviews series. This series reviews books published during the twentieth century which have been deemed to be among the most important contributions to the field of intellectual history.

The publication in 1949 of Morton White's study of late nineteenth-century antiformalism in American thought occurred at a very peculiar time in the history of American philosophy. The post-World War II transformation of American philosophy departments into centers for analytic philosophy succeeded in marginalizing the main currents of antiformalism, including pragmatism and naturalism. The theoretical shift ushered in by the emigration to America of the famous Vienna Circle, including Rudolf Carnap, Herbert Feigl, and Albert Blumberg, and the turn to logical positivism vanquished questions of experience and selfhood to other academic departments. But political theorists and social critics of the 1950s, preoccupied with the fate of the individual in the wake of widespread conformity and the specter of totalitarianism, had more use for the melancholy of French existentialism than the optimism of American pragmatism. It was an era in which "Dewey's views [were] being replaced by Kierkegaard's" (p. 3). In this regard, White's

contribution to the field of intellectual history in this period lay not only in his particular interpretation of the antiformalists but in his willingness to consider their contribution to the philosophical enterprise at all.

White's demarcation of the major American thinkers of the late nineteenth century, including John Dewey, Charles Beard, Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Harvey Robinson, and Thorstein Veblen, as antiformalists marked the first work of intellectual history dedicated to a broad theorization of this period. He was the first to treat these individual critiques of historical analysis, philosophical speculation, and economic discourse as part of a shared intellectual project. What united these thinkers, according to White, was the growing sense that theirs was a period of transition, that the social revolution prompted by the corporate form had fundamentally altered the social and cultural framework of modern society. Consequently, all of these thinkers were preoccu-

pieced with delegitimizing the standards of the past and projecting an outline for the future. The “revolt against formalism,” then, entailed a rejection of “intellectual and moral rigidity” (p. 240) and an attachment to “the moving and the vital in social life” (p. 6).

Unwilling to lament over the passing of the social framework of the nineteenth century, the antiformalists treated the political, legal, and economic revolution prompted by corporate capitalism as justification for intellectual revolution as well. The result was “an intellectual pattern compounded of pragmatism, institutionalism, behaviorism, legal realism, economic determinism, the ‘new history’” (p. 3). Overcoming formalism entailed an active engagement with reality, a willingness to dispense with rigid categories of thought, and a commitment to the scientific method as a tool of social analysis.

The tension throughout the book rested in White’s willingness to acknowledge the importance for the antiformalist critique of the supposed distinction between “social science and moral value and obligation” (p. 204) and his unwillingness to accept the reevaluation of epistemology that the antiformalists proposed. In other words, White refused to jettison the commitment to logical thinking he inherited from analytic philosophy. White was unwilling to abandon the claims of positivism for the pragmatism of Dewey and went as far as claiming that the antiformalists “were unable to set limits to this revolt against rigidity and sometimes they allowed it to run wild” (p. 241).

Of course, White’s call in 1949 for a foundationalist philosophy seemed justified in light of the terror the Western world had just experienced. Intellectual rigor and logical analysis appeared as both a scientific commitment and a political statement. But his readiness to dismiss antiformalism stemmed from a philosophical misunderstanding. He misconstrued the essential point of Dewey’s pragmatism, namely, that truth claims and moral judgments are part and parcel of community and social agreement, not a priori claims. What seemed to White as a collapse into relativism was for Dewey a call for pluralism and a demand for democracy. White’s claim that the antiformalist revolt “was speedily followed by a reign of terror in which precision and logic and analytic methods became suspect” did not do justice to the democratic commitments of reformers like Dewey and Beard.

In other words, White’s insistence on separating the philosophical choices of the antiformalists from their social and historical context did not do justice to their intellectual enterprise. From Dewey’s attempt to found a

journal committed to bridging philosophy and social reform (the failed “Thought News”) to Beard’s involvement in the American Socialist Society and the Workers’ Education Bureau to Robinson’s help in the founding of the New School for Social Research, the antiformalists were committed to dissolving the boundary between the life of the mind and the reform of the body politic. Philosophical truth, Dewey maintained, was not a sterile reconstruction of the world of objects, but a tool with which to actively engage reality. His critique of the spectator theory of knowledge was premised on dissolving the boundary between the subject and its environment. Likewise, Beard and Robinson insisted that their historical narratives perform a social function and act as a possible answer to the complexities of modern society. Fact and value, in this regard, were not separable.

This was what White found so troubling about the moral character of antiformalism. For example, to bolster his claim that the ethical stance of the antiformalists was suspect White briefly gestured at the debate over U.S. intervention in World War I and concluded that the attempt by thinkers like Dewey to justify intervention on philosophical grounds was “hardly more than a commonplace when freed of certain verbal tricks” (p. 164). White argued that Dewey’s distinction between force and violence, the former as morally neutral and the latter as wasteful and unintelligent, was a case of improper logic, an attempt to establish the means of action after the ends were already determined.

Consequently, he embraced Randolph Bourne’s critique of pragmatism, a critique that was particularly cogent to the Young Intellectuals of the 1920s and 1930s and found added support in the post-World War II era. But what was to White simply verbal wordplay was to Dewey an intellectual defense of American support for multiculturalism and national self-determination. Dewey refused to accept the absolutist claim of the pacifists, and, instead, asked the pragmatist question, what would be the consequence of non-intervention on the part of the United States? The political outcome was obviously not to Dewey’s liking, but he was willing to commit morally to the defense of pluralism.

The problem with White’s analysis, then, stemmed from the particular brand of intellectual history he pursued. His work was specifically a history of ideas and tended to take on a static quality of its own. His failure to address the social embodiment of these ideas made many of his connections forced and abstract. While later historians have examined this intellectual revolution as an

institutional movement (Bruce Kuklick, Dorothy Ross), as the philosophical foundation of a much larger progressive transformation (R. Jeffrey Lustig, James Kloppenberg, James Livingston), or as intellectual biography (Robert Westbrook, John Diggins), White remained within the confines of philosophical discourse and consequently was unable to do justice to a body of social thought determined to eliminate the ontological divide between subject and object, knower and known, and mind and body.

But this limitation does not diminish the historical importance of White's work. Those of us today commit-

ted to reinvigorating social theory through the revival of pragmatism owe a debt of gratitude to scholars like Morton White who, in an era dominated by the extremes of logical positivism and existentialism, were willing to acknowledge the importance of antiformalists like John Dewey, Thorstein Veblen and Charles Beard to social philosophy.

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