

## **Outlining the nature of historical knowledge and assessment of the historian's responsibility to objectivity and empiricism.**

History is neither fact accumulation nor unrestricted interpretation but a disciplined inquiry reconstructing the past through evidence, method, and critical judgement.

This balance between empiricism and interpretation lies at the heart of historiography and becomes most visible when challenged by ideological distortion, as in the Irving–Penguin Books and Lipstadt trial. That case provides a compelling study for examining historical knowledge and the historian's responsibility to objectivity. This essay outlines the nature of historical knowledge and assesses the historian's responsibility to objectivity and empiricism through three debates: the Irving trial, the idea of progress, and the postmodern critique of historical truth. It argues that while historical interpretation is inevitably shaped by perspective, it remains constrained by empirical standards. This distinguishes responsible scholarship from ideological falsification. In doing so, this essay adopts a critical realist position, recognising that although historical knowledge is mediated through interpretation, the past nonetheless places real constraints on what can responsibly be claimed about it.

Historians have approached the problem of historical knowledge and objectivity from differing but overlapping perspectives. Richard J. Evans defends a critical empiricist position, arguing that interpretation is inevitable but by evidence constrains claims.<sup>1</sup> He acknowledges the linguistic turn regarding history as “only one discourse among many”, challenging causal authority.<sup>2</sup> Gabrielle M. Spiegel emphasises the role of

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History*, 2nd edn, London, Granta, 2000, p. 127.

<sup>2</sup> Evans, *In Defence of History*, p.13.

language and power, questioning objectivity while maintaining that texts remain socially grounded.<sup>3</sup> Deborah E. Lipstadt shows how Holocaust denial exploits relativism to collapse scholarship into propaganda.<sup>4</sup> Aviezer Tucker distinguishes legitimate historiographical revision by evidential standards.<sup>5</sup> Taken together, these perspectives reveal a central tension: historical knowledge is interpretive and contingent, yet bounded by empirical accountability.

This historiographical tension becomes most visible not in abstract debate, but in concrete cases where the boundaries between interpretation and distortion are actively contested. The libel trial of David Irving against Deborah E. Lipstadt and Penguin Books provides a particularly clear illustration of these limits in practice. At issue was not a good-faith disagreement over interpretation, but the systematic manipulation of historical evidence. The court found that Irving had mistranslated documents, selectively quoted sources, and omitted material that contradicted his claims, thereby producing a narrative that could not be sustained by the evidentiary record.<sup>6</sup> As the presiding judge, Charles Gray, concluded, Irving had misrepresented and manipulated historical evidence.<sup>7</sup> This case underscores the distinction identified by Aviezer Tucker: while historiography is inherently revisionist, legitimate revision depends upon adherence to evidential standards rather than ideological intent.<sup>8</sup> In this way, the Irving trial demonstrates that, although historical interpretation allows

---

<sup>3</sup> Gabrielle M. Spiegel, 'History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages', *Speculum*, vol. 65, no. 1, 1990, pp. 60-65.

<sup>4</sup> Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*, New York, Free Press, 1993, pp. 18-19.

<sup>5</sup> Aviezer Tucker, 'Historiographic Revision and Revisionism: The Evidential Difference', in Michal Kopeček (ed.), *Past in the Making: Historical Revisionism in Central Europe after 1989*, Budapest, Central European University Press, 2008, pp. 1-2.

<sup>6</sup> Evans, *Lying About Hitler*, p. 95.

<sup>7</sup> Evans, *Lying About Hitler*, pp. 227-228.

<sup>8</sup> Tucker, 'Historiographic Revision', pp. 1-2.

for debate and reinterpretation, the discipline itself maintains enforceable boundaries beyond which claims cease to qualify as credible history.

Postmodern theory emphasised the linguistic construction of knowledge challenging the belief that historians can recover authentic textual meaning through objective investigation. But as critics have noted, even within a postmodern framework, evidence retains a constraining role. Gabrielle Spiegel citing Derrida's 'il n'y a pas de hors-texte,' argues for a 'social logic of the text'.<sup>9</sup> However, Lawrence Stone noted that documentary evidence still constrains interpretation, allowing historians to distinguish plausible accounts from speculation.<sup>10</sup> The challenge posed by postmodernism therefore did not eliminate historical truth claims but encouraged historians to develop more self-reflective methods while maintaining empirical standards.<sup>11</sup> The Irving trial illustrates this tension between interpretation and evidence, demonstrating that historical debate remains grounded in empirical scrutiny rather than purely discursive analysis. Spiegel's 'social logic' would, for instance, allow a critic to expose Irving's manipulation precisely because texts bear traces of their production context that resist arbitrary re-reading.

Evans's expert testimony during the Irving trial illustrates how historical method operates in practice. In his detailed report for the defence, Evans demonstrated that Irving had repeatedly mistranslated German documents, omitted contextual evidence, and selectively quoted sources in ways that distorted their original meaning. These distortions formed a consistent pattern supporting Irving's

---

<sup>9</sup> Gabrielle M. Spiegel, 'History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages', *Speculum*, vol. 65, no. 1, 1990, p. 63.

<sup>10</sup> Lawrence Stone and Gabrielle M. Spiegel, 'History and Post-Modernism', *Past & Present*, no. 135, May 1992, p. 192.

<sup>11</sup> Evans, *In Defence of History*, pp. 191–195.

ideological conclusions. Reconstructing archival context, Evans showed that Irving's claims collapsed under scrutiny. As Evans testified, Irving's work was 'revealed as a house of cards, a vast apparatus of deception and deceit,' confirming Lipstadt's description of Irving as 'a Hitler partisan who manipulated the historical record'.<sup>12</sup>

Historical knowledge is reconstructed rather than directly observed, derived from the traces of past events preserved in documents, artefacts, and testimony. Because the past itself is irretrievable, historians must work with surviving evidence produced within specific cultural and political contexts. These sources are often fragmentary or biased, which means that historical knowledge is necessarily provisional and open to revision. As Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob contend, historical knowledge is shaped by the historian's cultural and theoretical standpoint, meaning it is never a neutral mirror of the past. However, they insist that this contingency does not lead to complete arbitrariness. As Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob aver:

We see no reason to conclude that because there is a gap between reality and its narration (its representation), the narration in some fundamental sense is inherently invalid<sup>13</sup>

Rather, disciplined historians can still produce partial, objective explanations by integrating causal analysis, social contextualisation, and narrative coherence, avoiding the postmodernist cul-de-sac where all accounts are deemed equally fictitious or mythical.

The discipline of history is governed by shared methodological norms that regulate how knowledge claims are made and assessed. Source criticism, contextualisation,

---

<sup>12</sup> Richard J. Evans, *Lying About Hitler: History, Holocaust, and the David Irving Trial*, New York: Basic Books, 2001, p. 103.

<sup>13</sup> Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*, New York: Norton, 1994, p. 235.

corroboration, and transparency of argument enable historians to evaluate competing interpretations and distinguish plausible reconstructions from speculative or tendentious accounts. Facts do not simply ‘speak for themselves’<sup>14</sup>, instead, the evidentiary record constrains interpretation by limiting what may plausibly be claimed about historical events. As Evans argues, historians cannot ‘impose any meaning we wish’ upon the past but must instead ‘listen attentively to possibly disconcerting “voices” of the past’ rather than project ‘self-interested demands’ upon them.<sup>15</sup>

Epistemologically, history occupies a middle position between positivism and relativism. Nineteenth-century historians influenced by the work of Leopold von Ranke emphasised archival research and factual accuracy, believing that disciplined historical method could reconstruct the past ‘*wie es eigentlich gewesen*’ (as it essentially happened.)<sup>16</sup> Later critics exposed the limits of this confidence, contributing to what Georg Iggers describes as the ‘crisis of the Rankean paradigm’, in which interpretation and selection came to be recognised as unavoidable features of historical practice.<sup>17</sup> Even so, most historians continue to accept that the past places real constraints on what can responsibly be said about it. Objectivity in history does not require neutrality or the absence of values. Rather, it denotes a commitment to intellectual honesty, evidentiary accountability, and openness to critique. Historians aim to restrain personal bias through methodological discipline rather than eliminate interpretation altogether.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Evans, *In Defence of History*, p.116.

<sup>15</sup> Evans, *In Defence of History*, p.106.

<sup>16</sup> Leopold von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, ed. Georg G. Iggers, London and New York: Routledge, 2011, p. 86.

<sup>17</sup> Georg G. Iggers, ‘The Crisis of the Rankean Paradigm in the Nineteenth Century’, *Syracuse Scholar*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1988, pp.44–45.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

Empiricism is central to this process. Historical arguments must be grounded in verifiable sources that other scholars can examine and contest. This shared evidentiary framework enables history to function as a collective enterprise rather than a set of private narratives. While historians may disagree over interpretation, they do so within agreed parameters of evidence and method. The meaning of objectivity has evolved over time, with twentieth-century historians increasingly recognising the influence of ideology, language, and social position on historical writing. These insights encouraged reflexivity but did not abolish empirical standards. Instead, they reinforced the need for transparency about assumptions and careful engagement with sources. Objectivity thus became a regulative ideal rather than an attainable state.

The Irving–Penguin Books and Lipstadt trial provide a particularly clear illustration of the boundaries of legitimate historical practice. As the trial demonstrated, Irving's work systematically distorted evidence.<sup>19</sup> Citing Evans, Irving:

...bent this reliable source to suit his argument, misrepresented the historical data, and skewed the documents on which he relied, by placing quotations in false context, removing part of the record to a footnote, and mixing up two different conversations so that it looked as if...<sup>20</sup>

The distinction between legitimate historical revision and ideological denial is central to understanding the Irving case. As Tucker explains, historiography is inherently revisionist because historians continually revise interpretations in light of new evidence and questions; however, the Irving case demonstrates that such revision

---

<sup>19</sup> Evans, *Lying About Hitler*, p.103.

<sup>20</sup> Evans, *Lying About Hitler*, p.95.

must remain accountable to evidence, or it ceases to be history and becomes ideological distortion.<sup>21</sup>

Evidence-driven revision occurs when newly discovered sources modify existing interpretations of the past, and in this sense, revision is essential to historical scholarship. However, Tucker emphasises that revisionism becomes problematic when historians begin with ideological conclusions and manipulate evidence to support them. Holocaust denial illustrates this clearly: rather than engaging with the extensive documentary and testimonial record, deniers selectively quote or remove sources from context.<sup>22</sup> The controversy surrounding David Irving therefore raised not simply a dispute over interpretation but a deeper question about the evidentiary standards separating historical scholarship from ideological falsification. Lipstadt's argument was not that historians must agree on every aspect of the Holocaust, but that denial falls outside the norms of responsible scholarship. The judgement affirmed that while interpretation is inevitable, it must remain accountable to evidence.<sup>23</sup>

Claims that deliberately falsify the record cannot be defended as alternative perspectives. This case clarifies the distinction between interpretive plurality and epistemic relativism. Legitimate historical debate allows for disagreement over causation, emphasis, and meaning, but not over the existence of events established by overwhelming evidence. Holocaust denial represents an abandonment of empiricism rather than a challenge to orthodoxy. Debates about objectivity intersect

---

<sup>21</sup> Tucker, 'Historiographic Revision and Revisionism', pp. 1–3.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4–6.

<sup>23</sup> Evans, *Lying About Hitler*, p. 266.

with broader questions about historical meaning, particularly the idea of progress, because interpretations of the past often rely on assumptions about its direction. Enlightenment historians, for example, frequently understood history as a linear movement toward reason, liberty, and improvement, thereby imposing a teleological structure on historical explanation.<sup>24</sup>

Subsequent historians criticised this approach for projecting modern values onto earlier societies and simplifying complex historical experiences. The catastrophes of the twentieth century further undermined confidence in progress as a universal historical law. As a result, historians increasingly rejected grand narratives in favour of contextual and contingent explanations.<sup>25</sup> The decline of progress narratives did not, however, entail the abandonment of meaning or explanation. Instead, it reinforced the importance of historicism: understanding past ideas and actions within their own cultural and temporal frameworks. By resisting present-day moral judgement, historians aim to reconstruct the past on its own terms while remaining accountable to evidence.<sup>26</sup>

Postmodern critiques intensified scepticism about objectivity by emphasising the constructed nature of historical narratives. Language, discourse, and power relations were shown to shape historical representation, undermining claims to neutral or universal truth. These insights productively challenged naïve empiricism and encouraged greater reflexivity among historians.<sup>27</sup> However, taken to extremes, postmodernism risks collapsing the distinction between interpretation and invention.

---

<sup>24</sup> J. H. Plumb, *The Death of the Past*, London: Macmillan, 1969, p.37.

<sup>25</sup> Evans, *In Defence of History*, pp. 129–133.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 224–225.

<sup>27</sup> Spiegel, 'History, Historicism and the Social Logic of the Text' pp. 63–69.

If all narratives are equally valid, then no principled basis remains for rejecting falsification or propaganda. Lipstadt's concern about relativism speaks directly to this danger. Holocaust denial exploits relativist language to claim legitimacy while rejecting empirical accountability.<sup>28</sup> Most practising historians have responded by adopting a critical realist position. They accept that historical knowledge is mediated and interpretive while maintaining that the past constrains interpretation. Evidence does not determine meaning, but it does limit what can plausibly be argued. The Irving trial therefore demonstrated that, despite postmodern scepticism about historical truth, professional historical practice still depends on empirical verification and source criticism.

Historians do not merely produce academic knowledge; they shape public understandings of the past. This confers a responsibility to uphold standards of evidence and honesty, particularly when historical claims are used to legitimise prejudice or violence.<sup>29</sup> Ethical historical practice requires transparency, acknowledgment of uncertainty, and resistance to ideological manipulation. Objectivity, understood as fairness and empirical accountability, functions as a safeguard against the misuse of history. By enforcing disciplinary standards, historians protect both the integrity of the past and the credibility of their profession.<sup>30</sup>

These controversies over truth and interpretation are not confined to Holocaust historiography. Historians frequently disagree about how the past should be interpreted, and such disagreements can spill into broader political debates known

---

<sup>28</sup> Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust*, p. 283.

<sup>29</sup> Evans, *In Defence of History*, p. 67.

<sup>30</sup> Evans, *In Defence of History*, pp.110–118.

as “history wars.”<sup>31</sup> Competing interpretations of the past often reflect wider cultural conflicts about identity, memory, and national narratives. However, while historians may legitimately disagree about interpretation, those debates remain meaningful only when they are grounded in evidence and methodological transparency. The Irving trial therefore illustrates a crucial boundary within historiography: disagreement among historians is legitimate, but deliberate distortion of evidence falls outside accepted norms.

Historical knowledge is neither an objective mirror of the past nor a relativistic free-for-all. It is a disciplined form of inquiry that balances interpretation with empiricism and subjectivity with methodological restraint. This balance reflects the central historiographical insight that interpretation is unavoidable, but evidence places real limits on what historians can responsibly claim. The Irving–Lipstadt case demonstrates why disinformation cannot be granted the same intellectual status as genuine historical scholarship. While critiques of progress and postmodern challenges to objectivity have transformed historical practice, they have not negated the historian’s responsibility to evidence-based reasoning. Ultimately, the debate between empiricist and postmodern approaches reveals that historical knowledge is best understood not as objective certainty, but as disciplined interpretation constrained by evidence. In an era of widespread misinformation, the discipline of history’s commitment to empiricism and ethical practice remains essential to preserving the past’s intellectual integrity.

---

<sup>31</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, “‘Black Armband’ versus ‘White Blindfold’ History in Australia”, *Victorian Studies*, vol.46, no. 4, 2004, pp. 655–660.

## Bibliography

- Brantlinger, Patrick. "Black Armband" versus "White Blindfold" History in Australia'. *Victorian Studies*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2004, pp. 655–674.
- Carr, E. H. *What Is History?* London: Penguin, 1961.
- Evans, Richard J. *In Defence of History*. 2nd edn, London: Granta, 2000.
- Evans, Richard J. *Lying About Hitler: History, Holocaust, and the David Irving Trial*. New York: Basic Books, 2001.
- Iggers, Georg G. 'The Crisis of the Rankean Paradigm in the Nineteenth Century'. *Syracuse Scholar*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1988, pp. 43–50.
- Jenkins, Keith. *Re-Thinking History*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Lipstadt, Deborah E. *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*. New York: Free Press, 1993.
- Novick, Peter. *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Plumb, J. H. *The Death of the Past*. London: Macmillan, 1969.
- Spiegel, Gabrielle M. 'History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages'. *Speculum*, vol. 65, no. 1, 1990, pp. 59–86.
- Stone, Lawrence and Gabrielle M. Spiegel. 'History and Post-Modernism'. *Past and Present*, no. 135, 1992, pp. 189–208.
- Ranke, Leopold von. *The Theory and Practice of History*. Edited with an introduction by Georg G. Iggers. London and New York: Routledge, 2011.
- Tucker, Aviezer. 'Historiographic Revision and Revisionism: The Evidential Difference', in Michal Kopecek (ed.), *Past in the Making: Historical Revisionism in Central Europe after 1989*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008, pp. 1–15.