Assess the extent to which Holocaust denial has been influenced by relativism

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Synopsis

The question for this essay was drawn from an interest in postmodernism and the consequences of its challenge to conventional history. Holocaust denial likewise intrigued me - I wondered how, and more importantly why, one would deny the genocide of six million. In choosing this topic I was hesitant as I feared the possibility of conversion to denial. My original intention was to argue that relativism is unethical because it legitimises Holocaust denial as an equally valid truth. However I gradually discarded this view upon reading postmodern responses which illustrated how relativism repudiates denial. Further research into two deniers revealed their distaste for critical theory, leading me to investigate why some empiricist historians make the connection between relativism and Holocaust denial and the extent to which the former has impacted on the latter, if at all.

Pierre Vidal-Naquet’s Assassins of Memory (1980) was the earliest and most devastating response to Holocaust deniers – namely to the notorious Robert Faurisson. It was crucial for this essay as it examined the ideologies that perpetuate deniers’ fallacious approach to history. Similarly, Deborah Lipstadt’s Denying the Holocaust (1993) provided an updated and valuable analysis on denial. Moreover Lipstadt condemned relativism for adding fuel to the deniers’ fire, especially David Irving’s, whose work has also been included to demonstrate the absolute nature of deniers’ claims. Robert Eaglestone’s Postmodernism and Holocaust Denial (2001) and Patrick Finney’s articles contained compelling arguments in defence of relativism and were essential for my final judgement.

This essay begins by summarising contemporary empiricist views on the relationship between Holocaust denial and relativism. A subsequent analysis of the nature of the arguments espoused, the methodology employed, and the ideologies held, by the deniers, exposes their interpretations for what they really are: political instruments disguised as ‘truth’. Combined with an evaluation of empiricist and postmodernist arguments, this essay demonstrates how relativism’s influence on deniers has been extremely limited, albeit it has indirectly fostered a climate in which they will be best received. Yet conversely, and rather ironically, postmodernism has also promoted fresh approaches to tackling pseudo-history in recent years.

"The proof for the reality of the gas chambers cannot be adduced if the rules adducing the proof are not respected." — Jean-François Lyotard.

There are many ‘-isms’ that explain the complexities of the world. Relativism is perhaps one of the most controversial. From its genesis — when Protagoras declared “man is the measure of all things” — to its permeance in our postmodern culture today, relativists have claimed there are no absolute truths. By the late 1970s, truth and objectivity’s theoretical demise was accompanied by an increase in Holocaust denial in Western academic circles. Parallels were drawn between Holocaust deniers and postmodernism’s leading exponent Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) who was a Nazi during World War II. This led many empiricists to subscribe to the view that relativism had reached its limits in the death camps. Does relativism breed deniers of true history? Some postmodernists have argued otherwise; deeming their approach to be ethically superior when it comes to fighting Holocaust denial. Due to their different approaches to history, empiricists and postmodernists disagree in their assessment of the degree to which Holocaust deniers are influenced by relativism.

Richard Evans, distinguished historian of modern Germany, asserts that the contemporary intellectual climate paves the way for pseudo-scholars to promote dangerous ideologies. His view is supported by Deborah Lipstadt, prominent Jewish and Holocaust historian, who argues that “it [postmodernism] fosters deconstructionist history at its worst. No fact, no event, and no aspect of history has any fixed meaning or content. There is no ultimate historical reality. Holocaust denial is part of this..."
phenomenon." This climate was fostered by Hayden White (the radical relativist) and his theory of employment, which argues that history is a genre, as much fiction as it is fact. Lipstadt believes historical reality "is ultimately found and not made" and that White's relativist attitude grants validity to any interpretation of the past, be it truthful or not. Consequently relativism is unethical as it permits neo-Nazis and anti-Zionists to deny the Holocaust — "relativists are interested only in reshaping history and rehabilitating the perpetrators." Moreover, Lipstadt and Evans are empiricists who embrace the objectivity paradigm, whereby it is possible to be detached, systematic and dispassionate in the quest for "what actually happened." Thus to many anti-denial advocates, relativism appears to be not only unethical, but also antithetical to history as it pollutes the discipline with subjective notions of truth and reality.

Holocaust deniers' methodology and ideology must be scrutinised in order to establish the extent to which their arguments have been influenced by relativism. Through careful analysis, it is clear that Holocaust deniers do not employ the conceptual apparatus of relativism. By contrast, they claim to be objective truth tellers — yet their objectivity is consistently detracted by their political and ideological motives. In a similar vein, what they claim to be a search for truth is actually a search for falsehood, involving the omission, distortion and invention of evidence to reach "historically untenable conclusions." The justification for their perverse methodology is often derived from moral relativism, which claims that truth cannot be assessed by a universal standard and therefore all speech is equally valid.

Thus despite the fact that deniers don't embrace the relativist approach, the main impact of relativism has been to foster a climate in which they and their message will be best received. Since the late 1970s, Frenchman Robert Faurisson has been leading the campaign to establish a 'revisionist' school that removes from history the characters of the Holocaust. In an attempt to gain credibility for his radical views, Faurisson initiated denial's stylistic change from anti-Semitic dittos to academic prose and published letters in Le Monde (1978) claiming "the non-existence of the gas chambers is good news for a beleaguered humanity." In subsequent articles he described the Holocaust as "a single historical lie whose principal beneficiaries are the State of Israel and international Zionism and whose principal victims are the German people, but not its leaders, and the Palestinian people in its entirety." Faurisson's interpretation represented an extreme deviation from the conventional view of the Holocaust. However, rather than igniting the hoped for historical debate and thereby creating the 'revisionist' school, Faurisson instead received scathing criticisms of his methodology.

The French Jewish historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet viewed Holocaust denial as unworthy of historical debate and chose to examine Faurisson's methodology to truly elicit "the mechanisms of his lies and falsifications." Faurisson's approach to history was based on the premise that all Jewish witness testimony is worthless because they are either "forgeries, apocryphal or suspect." One example given is Emmanuel Ringelbaum's Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto (1952) which was indeed truncated before publication. However Vidal-Naquet pointed out this had no effect on the validity of the text in regards to Nazi policy as the passages in question were removed only because they were damaging to Polish national pride at the time. Therefore Faurisson's complete dismissal of the evidence is poorly justified. It is a technique dubbed as "The Art of Not Reading Texts," which has nothing to do with relativism. Unlike Lipstadt and Evans, Vidal-Naquet recognised this and therefore did not connect Faurisson's views to relativism. He noted "there are heroic forms of negation, and perverse ones as well." The latter is Faurisson, who as a former literature professor marked a distinctly anti-relativist stance in his assertion that "texts have only one meaning or they have no meaning at all." This absolute view is reflected in the crux of his argument — the Holocaust is a 'myth' forged by Allied propaganda for the benefit of Israel. He purports this to be the sole truth, but it is a completely flawed one given that it was unsupported by evidence. Therefore relativism plays virtually no role in explaining Faurisson's interpretation of the Holocaust.

Although Faurisson did not explicitly embrace the relativist approach, renowned advocates of free speech like Noam Chomsky used relativism to support his flawed arguments. In the Faurisson Affair of the early 1980s, Chomsky, a Jewish libertarian and linguist along with a "handful of anarcho-communists" were embroiled in the defence of Faurisson's right to publish works denying the Holocaust. Chomsky argued that free speech must be extended to all viewpoints no matter how fallacious or morally unpopular. Vidal-Naquet deemed Chomsky's actions as "scandalous" and attacked him for failing to distinguish between the legitimate revision of history and denying it altogether. By validating Faurisson's flawed perspective as "findings" in the name of free inquiry and moral relativism, Chomsky was effectively promoting the deniers' 'right' to subvert truth to political will. As an anti-Zionist, Faurisson believes the Holocaust was the pretext for the establishment of Israel, hence denying the Holocaust would strip Israel of her right to exist. He stated that "Jews and Zionists seek refuge in
violence and intimidation. They treat revisionists like Palestinians."24 This indicates that Faurisson is clearly not a "relatively apolitical liberal of some sort"25 as described by Chomsky. Alan Dershowitz, Harvard law professor and commentator on the Arab-Israeli conflict, made a pertinent observation on Chomsky's flirtation with anti-Zionism and found that "he has himself made statements about Zionist exploitation of the tragedy of World War II that are not, in my view, so different from some of those of Faurisson."26 By using the relativist argument to camouflage deeper philosophical and political motives, Holocaust deniers have been bestowed with undeserved legitimacy. Beyond creating a hospitable climate for Holocaust deniers, relativism has had virtually no impact on their methodology. In Hitler's War (1977), the British Holocaust denier David Irving argued that the Final Solution was conceived by SS leader Heinrich Himmler and kept secret from Hitler — who did not want to exterminate Jews. This desire to exculpate the Fuhrer is evident in his claim that Hitler issued "the explicit order that Jews were not to be liquidated"27 to Himmler. However, on examination of Himmler's 30th November 1941 phone log (which Irving used to base his claim) it is clear that Hitler was referring only to a specific trainload of Jews: "Judentransport aus Berlin [Jew-transport from Berlin] / Keine Liquidierung [No liquidation]."28 Thus, Irving omitted evidence to exaggerate its meaning and thereby exonerated Hitler. Evans observes that whilst the phone log is authentic, there is no evidence to suggest the order was made by Hitler and that this is a "pure surmise on Irving's part."29 What discredits Irving further is the fact that he replaced the word 'habeu' with 'Juden' in Himmler's 1st December 1941 phone log, which originally read: "Verwaltungsleiter der SS / haben zu bleiben [are to stay where they are]."30 This enabled him to argue that Hitler ordered "Jews to stay where they are."31 Irving is a fluent speaker and reader of German32 and therefore it is obvious he deliberately distorted the evidence because it did not support his predetermined and contradictory thesis that the Holocaust did not happen and if it did, Hitler was not responsible. Thus on examination of Irving's methodology it can be deduced that his interpretation is inconsistent and highly unreliable. The allegation that Irving's forgery was influenced by relativism is countered by his condescending statement that he did "not want to dignify this word, postmodern, with any kind of comment. It is a phoney argument. It is baloney. Churchill said, the job of the historian is to find out what happened and why."33 Irving's absolute approach is reflected in the absolute nature of his argument — there was no Holocaust. Thus again it can be seen that relativism has had no impact on a leading Holocaust denier's approach to history.

Like Faurisson, Irving's wilful and deliberate misrepresentation of the historical record can be best explained by his ideological agendas. Irving's failed libel case against Lipstadt (2000) who he claimed had tarnished his reputation by branding him as a "Hitler partisan"34 among other things culminated in the verdict that he was "an active Holocaust denier... anti-Semitic and racist and... associates with right-wing extremists who promote neo-Nazism."35 In the Trial, much doubt was cast over Irving's proclaimed status as a "laissez-faire liberal"36 due to his sustained political alliance with the fiercely nationalistic Deutsche Volkunion (German People's Union — DVU) and its leader Gerhard Frey.37 From 1982 to 1992, Irving (although not a party member) addressed annual DVU rallies, enjoyed "star status" and actively propagated their neo-Nazi goals (such as the advancement of the Aryan race and the restoration of White living space). Additionally, Irving's diaries reveal that he has spoken at three National Alliance (NA) meetings. The NA is an American based neo-Nazi organisation whose objectives are reminiscent of the DVU's. Clearly Irving shared the extreme bias of his associates and Lipstadt rightly argued that this obscured his objectivity.38 Thus Irving was not an 'honest anti-Semite' who derived meanings from the evidence in a relative fashion. Like Faurisson, his ideological position caused him to deliberately manipulate the evidence.

In recent years, postmodernists have challenged the widely accepted view that Lipstadt's victory in the Trial vindicated empiricism and by implication, defeated those who deny the possibility of establishing the absolute truth about the past. Welsh historian Patrick Finney deems this line of reasoning as nothing more than "a caricature conception of postmodernism."39 Finney argues that adhering to the generic conventions of the discipline will always produce a superior interpretation of history and that such a concept is not unique to empiricists.39 The technical process of empiricist methodology which involves "authenticating documents, weighing witness credibility and making findings of fact"39 is equivalent to the set of 'rules' postmodernists impose on the genre of history. However, to insist that this procedure will extract the absolute truth from the evidence is where the views of Finney and Lipstadt and Evans diverge. Finney denounces the existence of a single and unconditional interpretation because historians have conflicting "political, theoretical and aesthetic preferences."40 This leads postmodernists to reject empiricist objectivity and the belief that it was invoked in the case of Irving vs. Lipstadt. 'Objectivity', Finney argues, has consistently failed to prevent the emergence of politically adverse histories; anti-Zionist
and neo-Nazi Holocaust deniers as salient exemplars. Since "history has prostituted itself" left and right it is nonsensical to suggest that the "Western rationalist tradition" - if it ever existed - successfully countered Irving's bias. Instead Finney puts forward the argument that subjective engagement with the Holocaust with respect to the evidence, holds more value. As he poignantly states "the Holocaust is important not because of some detached, scholarly inquiry but because of an... abhorrence of racism, violence and genocide and because we passionately believe in the ethical imperative 'never again'."

Similarly, the British Holocaust and philosophy professor Robert Eaglestone is adamant that postmodernism offers an alternate source of refutation against deniers. In his endeavour to mediate between relativist and anti-relativist points of view, Eaglestone believes that understanding the "multicultures" which have developed from colonialism is paramount to the fight against Holocaust denial. He draws on the postmodern idea of 'cultural relativism', wherein society's local cultures are not assimilated into a dominant culture but are united through "respect and negotiation between different traditions." Holocaust deniers' hardline assault on this multiculture obtains its strength from the far right's absolute stance and its White racial nationalism. Thus Holocaust deniers are not and will never be culturally relative. Therefore postmodernism makes the connection between anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial "utterly explicit" or indeed any form of racism utterly explicit. In light of this, the relationship Lipstadt and Evans perceive between relativism and extremism is nonexistent. Eaglestone concurs with Finney's arguments and also believes that "simply asserting that history should be objective" without exploring what this means is actually what contributes to the climate that helps deniers appear to be legitimate. On the contrary, postmodern readings do not assume rational facts from historical documents, but take into account that meaning is relative and constructed. In adopting the postmodernist approach, texts may be deconstructed to illustrate the interplay of power and knowledge. Thus in dealing with Holocaust denial, postmodernism is ethically superior to traditional approaches. However this does not imply that the rules governing discourse should be disregarded altogether. As a moderate postmodernist, Eaglestone suggests that empirical and postmodern methods combine, as this is the ideal way to expose the masquerade of rational inquiry that is caused by nationalist and racist extremism. Therefore relativism plays a positive and significant role in promoting the application of new approaches to combat Holocaust denial.

The extent to which ideologues like Faurisson and Irving have been influenced by relativism does not stretch beyond theoretical attempts to link them together. In other words, Holocaust deniers have a political, not a postmodern purpose, although - as Chomsky demonstrated - relativism may be utilised to validate deniers' false claims. In this regard, Lipstadt and Evans are somewhat convincing in their assessment of relativism and the hospitable climate it creates for deniers. However, in defence of relativism, Eaglestone and Finney have made efforts to delineate how postmodernism can repudiate deniers. They present a far more compelling argument against objectivity and for deconstruction, without discarding the conventions of proper historical inquiry. Ultimately the views of empiricists and moderate postmodernists will differ, except in that they both agree historical debates should only be carried out within the limits set by the evidence. The evidence attesting to the reality of the Holocaust is beyond reasonable dispute. Since Irving and Faurisson failed to abide by this rule, they cannot, put simply, be classified as historians at all.

Endnotes
1 Jean-François Lyotard; translated by Georges Van Den Abbeele, The Differend: Phrases in Dispute (Minneapolis, 1988), p. 16.
6 John Warren, History and the Historians (London, 1999), pp. 119-120.
7 Lipstadt, op. cit., p. 21.
9 Leopold Von Ranke developed a sophisticated, systematic and neutral approach to history writing (i.e. scientific objectivity) which professionalised the discipline.
12 Le Monde is a French newspaper (English: The World).
15 Ibid., p. xxiv. Vidal-Naquet argued that just as an astrophysicist would not "enter into dialogue with a 'researcher' claiming that the moon was made from Roquefort cheese," he too, would not debate Faurisson on historical grounds. By that he meant there was no common
respect for the truth and therefore debating a denier would be futile.

16 Ibid., p. 58.
17 Robert Faurisson cited in Ibid., p. 22.
18 Ibid., p. 42.
19 Ibid., p. 139.
20 Robert Faurisson cited in Ibid., p. 45
21 Robert Faurisson, “Victories for Revisionism [Teheran Holocaust Conference]” 11 December, 2006, online at: http://www.fpp.co.uk/Auschwitz/Faurisson/sc_Teheran_conf_2005.html (accessed on 13/05/07). The ‘handful of anarcho-communists’ is an allusion to Noam Chomsky and others (Pierre Guillaume, Jean-Gabriel Cohn-Bendit and Serge Thion) who defended Faurisson’s right to free speech.
22 Vidal-Naquet, op. cit., p. 111.
25 Chomsky, op. cit.
29 Ibid.
30 Heinrich Himmler’s call to Oswald Pohl (chief of the concentration camp system) 1 December, 1941 cited in Ibid.
31 Irving, op. cit., p. 332.
33 E-mail from David Irving to Me, 21 May, 2007, online at: http://www.ipp.co.uk/Legal/Penguin/witness/Irving.html (accessed on 25/04/07).
34 Lipstadt, op. cit., p. 161.
38 The Hon. Justice Charles Gray, op. cit., section 5.3.
40 Ibid.
42 Ibid., p. 158.
43 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., p. 49.
49 Ibid., p. 62-63.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.

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The Ancient History community was saddened to learn of the death of Graham Joyner at the end of October 2008. Graham was well known to many teachers as a lecturer in Greek Ancient History and Archaeology at Macquarie University. Many will remember their student days listening to Graham's lectures on the Mycenaeans, Homer and the Trojan War and the Athenian Agora.

Graham was a great supporter of the HTA for many years. He spoke regularly at Conferences, Professional Development Days, Study Days and contributed to our journal. In the April 1982 edition of _Teaching History_ when the Archaeological Evidence Course was introduced, Graham's article on The Athenian Agora was "a must" for teachers confronted with this new 3 Unit Course.

In 1997 the HTA purchased a beautiful ancient Sicilian coin and donated it to The Museum of Ancient Cultures at Macquarie University. Graham's article about this coin and others, entitled _Coins and History_ is a valuable source for those interested in using numismatics in their teaching.

As Study Day Convenor, I was always very grateful to Graham for giving up his Saturdays to lecture to keen HSC Ancient History students. In those days lectures were held in The Bosch Lecture Theatre. Graham's topics included anything and everything Greek: the Minoans, the Mycenaeans, Greek Colonisation, Greek Tyrants, Solon, Kleishtenes ... and then there was The Athenian Agora.

Ancient History teachers always found Graham to be very supportive and willing to offer advice and help in all matters pertaining to the teaching of Ancient History. He maintained strong links between former students and Macquarie University and he will be missed by the Ancient History community and his many friends.

Philippa Medcalf