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The debate between historians and revisionists such as Holocaust deniers rests on a number of issues in epistemology, the branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of knowledge and how it is acquired: What is historical knowledge? How can we know if we possess the historical truth? What is the difference between a historiography that merely sympathizes with bizarre extremist politics and revisionist historiography that also fabricates misrepresentations of the past?

Historiography, our beliefs about the past, history, is in constant flux; our beliefs are constantly being revised. In that sense, all historians who conduct research are “revisionists.” Had historiography not been subject to constant revision, there would have been little for historians to do beyond transmitting received wisdom to yet another generation. Historiography is a progressive and innovative discipline composed of various dynamic research programs precisely because it is capable of revising itself, constantly improving itself, expanding knowledge and becoming relevant in new historical contexts. Broadly, there are three types of historiographic revision:

Evidence-driven revision results from the discovery of new evidence. New evidence may reduce the probabilities of hypotheses about the past that once had sufficiently high probability to be considered part of our knowledge of the past, or it may increase the probability of hypotheses that had low probabilities or were not even considered at all. New evidence that is more likely to support a new hypothesis than an older one causes a revision in historiography. Hypotheses that explain a broader range of evidence and lead to the discovery and explanation of new evidence are preferred to hypotheses that explain a narrower range of evidence. Progress in the history of historiography usually follows innovations that allow historians to utilize new types of evidence, such as the discovery of the archive as an evidential treasure trove in the first half of
the 19th century, or the later discoveries that led to the widespread use of non-documentary evidence such as material remains or bureaucratic records that can be used to generate quantitative historiography. The search for new theories and methods that can generate new evidence and new knowledge of the past is sometimes motivated by new interest in aspects of the past that once received little attention, such as the history of childhood or women, which had not been considered significant for historians in previous generations.

Significance-driven revision results from changes in what historians consider significant in history. At the very least, historians must choose which of the many probable propositions about the past which they derive or may derive from the evidence is worth mentioning. Some wish to present their knowledge of the past in a structured manner to create a narrative of past events. Selection and structuring require a sense of the meaning or significance of the historical process. This perception of significance is revised as a result of historical changes. For example, historical changes lead historians to search for precedents to better understand their present. The emergence of totalitarianism in the 20th century led to greater interest in the Anabaptist experiment with totalitarianism in 16th-century Münster. Contemporary terrorism has led to examinations of anarchist terrorism at the start of the 20th century. Since historical processes take time, the significance of some events and their outcomes may become patent only long after their occurrence. Historians can present such a retrospective understanding of processes only after they are completed; nobody could have written of the Hundred Years War before it was over, a fuller understanding of the significance of the US support for anti-Soviet resistance in Afghanistan during the 1980s only emerged after the attacks against the United States in 2001. Ethical consequentialists, who measure the moral value of action according to its consequences, may also be inclined to revise their moral evaluations of historical actions and the agents who performed them according to their significance in retrospect.

Value-driven revision takes place when historians reevaluate the historical events and processes they describe and explain. This may result either from new evidence that leads to a reevaluation of past events, or from a revision in the system of values that historians employ to evaluate historical events, actions, and actors. For example, the historiography of art, literature, philosophy, music, or architecture has never stopped revising its evaluations of works of art, literature and philosophy. Such reevaluations keep historiography relevant.
Readers of scientific historiography, especially those who read more than a single interpretation of similar evidence, can easily distinguish revisions that are due to different systems of values or considerations of significance from those that result from different evidence. Revisionist historiography shares with revised historiography the revision of historical significance and system of values. However revisionist historiography is distinct from revised historiography in being immune to the effects of new evidence. One of the chief revisionist strategies has been to “make fuzzy” epistemological issues, to make the distinction between evidence-based probable knowledge of history and fiction vague and unclear. It blurs the border between historiographic truth and falsehood by claiming there can be more than a single “true” historiographic narrative. Historical events like the Holocaust may then be “true” for some people, and “not true” for others. If historiography is reducible to the political, social and other values, interests and affiliations of the people who write it, the Holocaust may be a part of the narratives of some communities, but not of others. I demonstrate in this article that revisionist historiography can easily be distinguished from historiographic revisions. Revisionist historiography is uniquely founded on the penchant for therapeutic values over cognitive values. Revisionist attempts to confuse knowledge with fiction are founded on bad philosophy, invalid arguments and misunderstandings of contemporary epistemology and philosophy of science. We have very good reasons to believe in the historical truth of the Holocaust and to trust the methods that historians have been using to infer it.

A distinctively philosophical approach is required to debate revisionism because ordinary historical arguments are insufficient to combat the second line of defense of revisionists. When historians prove using evidence and standard historiographic methods that there was a Holocaust, the revisionists can and do fall back on disputing the epistemic standards of mainstream historiography; for example, by claiming that the political or ethnic biases of most historians, their “victors’ justice,” prevent them from seeing what the revisionists consider their “truth.” Arguably, historiography is written by the winners, and the vanquished Nazis may have their narrative as well, which may be just as legitimate. Though Holocaust deniers are neo-Nazis and/or anti-Semites of various shades who do not usually belong to the academic mainstream, the philosophical underpinnings of their attack on the epistemic foundations of our knowledge of the Holocaust are shared by some academics, who are neither right-wing political extremists, nor racists. Relativist and skeptical philosophers such as (the liberal) Richard Rorty or (the Marxist) Hayden White, both of Stanford
University, claim that it is impossible to prove the probability of the historical truth of the Holocaust, or for that matter any other historical event.

The apparent plausibility of this second line of defense of revisionism is founded on the false assumption that there are only two philosophical options: obsolete positivism or post-modern skepticism about our knowledge of the past. True, the 19th-century positivist “view from nowhere” notions of objectivity and truth that are referred to occasionally by historians have become obsolete in contemporary epistemology and philosophy of science, and for good reasons: all knowledge, most notably scientific knowledge, is theory- and value-laden. Most contemporary philosophers consider objectivity a form of inter-subjective perspective rather than truth independent of any viewpoint. However, progress in the philosophical understanding of knowledge and objectivity does not imply that “anything goes,” or that “truth is in the eye of the beholder”—an attitude that some philosophers call “perspectivism,” introduced by Nietzsche and upheld by Rorty. Instead of absolute truth, science (including historiography), expects its practitioners to achieve the best explanation of the evidence, the explanation that makes the evidence most likely and the explanatory hypothesis most probable. What historians consider knowledge, like scientific hypotheses, is just highly probable; historians offer fallible probable knowledge. Every science, including historiography, is value-laden. However, values are divided into cognitive values (precision in description of the evidence, simplicity of structure, scope of explanatory power, internal consistency and diligence in the search for evidence) that allow choice between competing hypotheses or theories, and other values that do not increase the probability of the truth of the propositions as they are attached to – moral or political values for example. Historiographic revisions are distinguishable from illegitimate revisionist historiography by their adherence to truth-conducive scientific cognitive values, and by their acceptance of a hierarchy of values according to which cognitive values take precedence over other value judgments in historiography.

I have argued elsewhere that consensus among historians, in a uniquely heterogeneous, large and uncoerced group, is a likely indicator of knowledge because shared knowledge rather than any complex set of biases is a more probable explanation of such a uniquely heterogeneous consensus (there is no competing heterogeneous consensus on inconsistent beliefs). I also argued that such a uniquely heterogeneous consensus in historiography emerged following the introduction around the turn of the 19th century of a new paradigm that came to be associated with Ranke. I argued that this paradigm is marked, in addition to shared cognitive val-
ues, by the inference of common causes, events in the past, from informa-
tion preserving similarities between their contemporary effects, the evi-
dence. But it is possible to prove the existence of such a heterogeneous
community of historians who share cognitive values, theory-laden meth-
ods and consequently likely knowledge of the past via negativa by exam-
ining beliefs about the past and historiographic cognitive values that are
outside the heterogeneous consensus and are best explained by the biases
of homogenous communities. Dissenting historiographies include for
example, “revisionist” historiography of the Holocaust; 19th-century na-
tionalist historiographies that “discovered” ancient national sagas; the
changing Bolshevik historiographies of their revolution, and conspiracy
theories.

The best explanation of the shared beliefs of homogenous communities
that dissent from the uniquely heterogeneous historiographic consensus is
their particular biases. A uniquely heterogeneous community of historians,
Jewish and Gentile, German and British, right-wing and left-wing, agree
that there was a Holocaust. “Revisionist historians” who deny it compose a
homogeneous community composed exclusively of Nazis or Nazi sympa-
thizers. There is a wide and uniquely heterogeneous consensus over the
historiography of early medieval Europe that is agreed on by historians of
all European national identities and by historians who are not Europeans or
do not have any national identity. The “historians” who affirmed the au-
thenticity of various forged national sagas, from those of the Scottish “sage”
Ossian to the alleged Czech medieval heroic sagas, shared single national
identities, and fervently so. A uniquely heterogeneous consensus on the
historiography of the Soviet Union evolved as evidence became available to
historians of all nationalities and all political opinions with the exception of
orthodox, Moscow-oriented communists. Advocates of mutually inconsis-
tent Bolshevik historiographies (as these historiographies kept being revised
from purge to purge) were either orthodox communists or Soviet subjects
who were coerced into toeing the party line.

Revisionist historiography usually relies on therapeutic values instead
of the standard consensus-generating cognitive values that historians of
diverse backgrounds agree on. Therapeutic values rate historiographic
propositions according to their effect on the psychological well-being of
their intended audience. Frequently-used therapeutic values in historiog-
raphy include: the denial of historical guilt, for instance through denying
the Holocaust; the promotion of self-respect, for instance via national
myths; and the elimination of a sense of alienation and absurdity, for in-
stance through conspiracy theories:
The conspiratorial world view offers us the comfort of knowing that while tragic events occur, they do at least occur for a reason, and that the greater the events, the greater and more significant the reason. Our contemporary world view, which the conspiracy theorists refuse to accept, is one in which nobody—not God, not us, not even some of us—is in control. Furthermore, the world (including the people in it) is uncontrollable, irrational, and absurd in a way illustrated by the plays of Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett.4

Probable historiographic knowledge may sometimes have therapeutic effects for some groups. For example, a member of a racially discriminated-against community, such as African American, may develop higher self-esteem if she learns of achievements of her forbears, e.g., of the ancient cultures of Africa and the contributions of African Americans to science and technology that clearly refute dominant racial stereotypes which may have lowered her self-esteem and confidence. But the scientific cognitive values of historiography are indifferent to their therapeutic effects. For example, a member of an unsuccessful or backward community may wish to believe his situation is the result of a global conspiracy against his people directed by some group of people he considers to be better off than he is. Such faith in a conspiracy theory has a therapeutic value because it shifts the responsibility for perceived misery onto someone else and releases the believer from self-inspection, self-criticism that might well lead to an acknowledgement of a need to reform and change his culture. But scientific historiography may discover that there is no evidence of any plan against his people and much evidence against it; nobody actually even noticed the unfortunate group, let alone conspired against it. Often, human misery has no larger meaning and nobody benefits from it. The cognitive values of scientific historiography allow the therapeutic chips to fall as they may.

The distinction between scientific and therapeutic historiography is indicated by the difference in the communities that accept them. Historiography founded on scientific cognitive values is accepted by a large, uniquely heterogeneous and uncoerced community. Historiographies founded on therapeutic values are accepted by particular homogenous communities that are clearly identifiable according to their problems and grievances; Holocaust denial is popular among neo-Nazis who dislike the guilt which the Nazis, and by implication their admirers and supporters, have borne, and who have a political interest in dissociating Nazism from mass murder. Particular national historiographic myths are promoted by nationalists of particular national identities who suffer from a deficit in heroic prestige; faith in conspiracies is promoted by particular groups of
people who share a sense of helplessness and meaninglessness as the world changes and passes them by. There has always been a market for therapeutic historiography because people and their institutions will always pay to promote, read, or hear therapeutic accounts of their collective, or for that matter personal past. The psychological equivalent of revisionist historiography would be therapies that would convince the patient that whatever personal failings they have, or social mess they have created for themselves, are the fault of someone else and that they have just been passive victims. Undoubtedly, such therapy may be effective in improving self-esteem, relieving guilt and instilling a sense of self-righteousness. However, the positive therapeutic effects of this narrative do not contribute anything to its probability. The abusive behavior of some parents may indeed be responsible for the character flaws of their offspring; their anxieties, inhibitions or obsessions; and, most significantly, their abusive behavior towards others. However, despite the therapeutic benefits of convincing adults that their parents worshipped Satan and engaged in child sacrifice and sexual abuse, and despite the therapeutic recovery of alleged “suppressed memories” of Satanic rituals and sexual abuse, there is little evidence that would make these narratives of abuse historically probable.

Inconsistencies between therapeutic and scientific cognitive values manifest themselves in social conflicts between homogenous therapeutic communities and members of the uniquely heterogeneous historiographic community that share cognitive values. During the 19th century various forged “ancient” poetic documents surfaced in Europe, but were exposed despite their therapeutic value for nationalist causes. The poems of the “Scottish Homer,” Ossian, were exposed in the early 19th century as having been written in the 18th century by James Macpherson. In Bohemia, Tomas G. Masaryk participated in exposing similar “ancient” Czech poems as forgeries. The universality of the cognitive values of scientific historiography is demonstrated by Masaryk’s dual role as the foremost leader of the Czech national movement who became later the first president of Czechoslovakia, and as a professional philosopher and the chief opponent of the forgeries.

Legitimate historians, like Masaryk, accept a hierarchy of values, according to which their scientific cognitive values take precedence over the therapeutic values and needs of their political, national, class, ethnic, gender, racial, religious and/or other group(s). We may want to believe that a group with which we identify has always been virtuous and faultless and that whatever blemishes we find in our group are the product of the evil that was done to us unjustly by some other class, or gender, or political,
national, ethnic, racial, religious and/or other group(s). But if this involves overriding the critical cognitive values of the historiographic community, this is exactly what the uniquely heterogeneous historiographic community should not let us believe in. Bluntly, but truthfully:

... the final and really meaningful distinction is not between feminist and non-feminist, or Marxist and non-Marxist, but between competent historians and incompetent ones. Those who put political programmes and slogans before the much more difficult task of patient analysis of the evidence are among the incompetent ones: they may be in fashion, they may briefly provoke useful controversy, but in the slow accumulation of knowledge, their work is unlikely to have great significance.

Legitimate historiography is marked by the precedence of critical cognitive values over other values, not by the absence of other values that generate different historiographic interpretations. Indeed, the presence of values in historiographic interpretation is inevitable. As long as the hierarchical precedence of cognitive over other values is preserved, legitimate historiography can accommodate myriad different and conflicting values and the ensuing interpretations.

Historiographic interpretations are affected by moral and aesthetic values, by the affiliations, political biases and perspectives of the historians who write them. This is the main reason for the differences between historiographic interpretations of similar historical processes and events. Yet, an excessive emphasis on the differences between historiographic narratives may overshadow the broad agreements among historiographic interpretations, made possible by shared cognitive values and a hierarchy of values that give precedence to cognitive values over other values. Once the requirements of the cognitive values are satisfied, there is ample space for personal interpretations, perspectives, value judgments and interpretations of the meaning and significance of historical processes. For example, legitimate Marxist historiography shares its cognitive values with the rest of the politically uniquely heterogeneous historiographic community and gives them precedence over the political values of Marxism. When the Marxist historian David Abraham published a book supporting the marxist thesis that the rise of the Nazis was underwritten by German big capital, but violated the cognitive values of historiography by playing fast and loose with the evidence, another Marxist historian, Henry Ashby Turner, who agreed with the thesis, effectively excommunicated Abraham and his book for violating the cognitive values of the historiographic community, Marxist or not. Philosophers of historiography have been debating whether historiography should or should not be value-laden. Once we
understand the hierarchy that gives precedence to consensus-generating cognitive values over other values that divide the historiographic community, it becomes clear that value-laden historiographic interpretation is inevitable, but hierarchically inferior to its scientific core.

The difference between scientific and therapeutic historiography, between historiography that makes revisions according to the evidence and revisionist historiography that ignores the evidence, can be illustrated by comparing Holocaust-denying revisionist fabrications of the past, and its “contextualization” in Ernst Nolte’s interpretation. The therapeutic–political purposes of both are similar: the denial of Nazi or German guilt for the crimes committed by Nazis, Germans and their allies during the Second World War, and the dissociation of Nazism, or German nationalism, or radical nationalism, from crimes against humanity in order to facilitate their resurgence. The revisionists ride roughshod over the cognitive values of scientific historiography and fantasize a Western conspiracy to fabricate evidence for the Holocaust, construct the remains of the concentration camps, write the documentation generated by German bureaucracy and contemporary eyewitnesses, and arrange for people to play the role of survivors who would offer oral evidence for the Holocaust. Nolte, by contrast, did not deny the relevant evidence that led to the historiographic consensus concerning the events of the Holocaust. His interpretation of the Holocaust varies from that of many other historians, amounting to a high-brow version of “Springtime for Hitler,” the imaginary Max Bialystock and Leo Bloom production of a Broadway musical about Hitler that concentrates on his virtues in Mel Brooks’ movie and play *The Producers*. Though morally deviant, this version of Nazi history still does not require the violation of the basic cognitive values of the historiographic community. Nolte constructed a comparative theoretical model that subsumes Nazism under a more general model of 20th-century totalitarianism, with the therapeutic effect of denying the moral uniqueness of Nazism. Nolte emphasized aspects of the Third Reich that were not evil, as the Bialystock and Bloom production does not neglect to mention that the Führer was an excellent dancer. Nolte considered Bolshevism as one of the causes for Nazism. Thus, he considered Nazism a response to, and a bulwark against, the spread of Communism. The therapeutic effect is in shifting responsibility from the German perpetrators to their nasty neighbors in the east.²⁰

Nolte’s interpretation resembles the speech of a defense attorney who mitigates after the court has convicted his client. He claims that the defendant grew up in a tough criminal neighborhood, he also did good deeds for
the community, and was provoked by the crimes of others. Nolte’s causal connection between Bolshevik and Nazi totalitarianism is surely weak and Bolshevism was neither a sufficient, nor a necessary cause of Nazism, but it does not blatantly violate the cognitive values of scientific historiography by ignoring or fabricating evidence. At most, Nolte’s opponents can claim that he is a lousy historian, as Bialystock and Bloom’s “Spring Time for Hitler” was a lousy musical, but not a fabricator. The arguments of Nolte’s opponents such as Christian Meier and Jürgen Kocka, for the uniqueness of the Holocaust and the peculiarities of National Socialism, resemble those of the prosecution when it argues for the incomparable severity of the crime, for the absence of extenuating circumstances. Yet, what is interesting in this Historikerstreit is not the predictable disagreements on the interpretation of recent history, which have obvious implications for contemporary political debates, but rather that both sides were able to agree on so much and remain within the bounds of a united historiographic community.11

To take another example closer to home, the outcomes of the collapse of Communism led to a flurry of conspiratorial interpretations of the collapse and the revolutions. To take just a single representative example from this genre, “the Dolejší Analysis” (1991) is a conspiracy theory about the Czechoslovak dissident movement of Charter 77 and the 1989 Velvet Revolution. Dolejší’s hypothesis was that the Charter 77 movement was invented and run by the communist secret services, the StB. The results of the Velvet Revolution, according to Dolejší, reflect a deal between the leaders of Charter 77 and their former handlers from the secret services that would allow both groups to share the post-communist spoils of power with immunity. Dolejší’s evidence was the social and institutional continuity in the composition of most of the Czech and Slovak elites after the Velvet Revolution. In politics and the media, where there was a marked replacement of elites, some former Charter 77 dissidents were indeed, initially, the beneficiaries. Dolejší assumed that the high positive correlation between the winners of the process of transition after 1989 and pre-1989 conflicting communist and dissident elites must have a conspiratorial explanation. The therapeutic value of this conspiracy theory lies in absolving the larger Czech public of complicity with or responsibility for the outcomes of Communism and the results of the Velvet Revolution. If Charter 77 was a communist front organization all along, it was right and prudent to avoid joining it prior to 1989, and ordinary people who did not become involved with dissent have nothing to be ashamed of. If the outcome of the Velvet Revolution is the result of a deal between
elites, ordinary people are neither responsible for it, nor obliged to strive and struggle to improve the results of this political revolution so as to try and wrestle control over their own lives in a new democracy away from the post-communist elite and its bureaucracy, because everything is a done deal anyway, the result of hidden machinations behind the scenes. It is all somebody else’s fault and nothing can be done to change it. Yet, despite the helpless passivity of the common people, the political world is still meaningful rather than absurd, since the evil conspiracy of the communist elite lurks behind everything. The therapeutic effects of this conspiracy theory do not detract from its probability. However, the main problem with this conspiracy theory, which does greatly reduce its probability, is the absence of corroboration. There is not a shred of documentary evidence or oral testimony about communist manipulation of the leadership of Charter 77, or about any deal along the lines of immunity in exchange for replacement of the political elites, as was the case in transitions in Latin America and South Africa. We know of such deals there because they generated documentary and other evidence, and the terms of the transition included a variety of explicit constitutional safeguards to protect the old elite from prosecution and to enable it to maintain its power. But in the post-communist case, on the one hand the nomenklatura was too used to relying on Soviet assistance to be able to threaten alternative elites with a civil war or a military coup once Soviet assistance was withheld, while on the other hand, the political opposition was too small to actually attempt a social revolution and the replacement of all institutional elites. A more plausible explanation, which makes the evidence of the continuity of elites more likely, explains a wider scope of evidence, and is founded on a diligent search for further evidence in other post-totalitarian countries such as Germany or other post-communist countries (three cognitive values). It is that since totalitarianism is marked by the active elimination and then prevention from the emergence of alternative elites, once it collapses, there are few alternative elites available to challenge and replace the totalitarian one, consequently there is always a spontaneous continuity of elites from totalitarian to post-totalitarian societies, with or without a conspiracy. As practically the only alternative political elite in the Czech lands, the 2,000 signatories of Charter 77 were the only alternative elite able and willing to receive the keys in 1989. But the political dominance of this elite was brief; as new elites have emerged from within the “gray” professional classes that had been politically passive prior to 1989. The relative tolerance of Charter 77 during the late seventies and eighties in comparison with the physical elimination of political
opposition during the terror of the fifties that Dolejší cited as evidence for secret police control over Charter 77 was in fact common to all late totalitarian regimes after the Khrushchev period and the deal which members of the Communist elites made with each other to restrain violence for mutual protection.

As many philosophers have noted,\textsuperscript{12} there is no \textit{a priori} proof that discredits all conspiracy theories, the attribution of a secret plan to a small group of people who attempt to influence large scale historical events via covert action. Conspiracies can and often do happen in history. The distinction between revisionist and legitimate conspiratorial historiographies lies in their relationship with the evidence, not in the content of their theories. The evidence for revisionist conspiracy theories usually consists of correlations between the attributed interests of small groups and large scale historical events, without evidence for the mediating intermediary actions and processes that should have connected the motives of the small group with the large scale historical events. Without such intermediary stages, it is easy to attribute all deaths of property owners to conspiracies by their inheritors, usually their children. As Keeley and Basham noted,\textsuperscript{13} conspiracy theories, like good scientific theories in that respect, tend to unify all the evidence, with the particular twist that they consider the absence of evidence that would support the conspiracy theory, and even evidence that seems to contradict the theory, as evidence of the conspiracy, of its ability to conceal relevant evidence and fabricate evidence that appears to falsify it. Keeley suggested that conspiracy theories are akin in this respect to universal skepticism about knowledge, introduced by Descartes’ hypothesis of a demon that controls all our sense data in order to deceive us, thereby explaining all our sensations and beliefs. Keeley then suggests that conspiracy theories may be dismissed and ignored on similar grounds to universal epistemic skepticism, as having low prior plausibility. I would add that universal skepticism, like revisionist conspiracy theories, is unfruitful as it does not lead to any new discoveries, nor can it predict or explain precisely why reality is as it is.

Keeley concluded that conspiracy theories prefer “an almost nihilistic degree of skepticism” to “absurdism.”\textsuperscript{14} Basham replied to Keeley that the four standard arguments against conspiracy theories, their unfalsifiability, the uncontrollability of human affairs by a small number of conspirators who should keep their conspiracies secret, the positive evidence for the trustworthiness of public institutions and public information, and the \textit{ad hominem} accusation that conspiracy theorists are paranoid, are not sufficient to exclude conspiracy theories in general. Unfalsifiable theories can
be true, some institutions can and do keep conspiracies secret, public institutions, especially in illiberal states, are not trustworthy, and paranoids may be persecuted. I think that the problem with Keeley’s formulation of the problem is in its bivalent choice between universal skepticism and absurdity. Absurdity is a reflection on the teleological state of the universe, namely the absence of a telos, a meaning or end to the historical process. True though this existentialist world view may be, it is not an explanation of the world, it is a reflection on its state of meaninglessness. Conspiracy theories on the other hand are primarily an explanation of the way the world is, as caused by the interests or motives of a small group of people. This small group imposes its interests clandestinely on the world and consequently the end of the historical process corresponds with its interests. Proper competitors to conspiracy theories would then be alternative explanations of the historical evidence for conspiracy theories, most notably the positive correlations between historical events and processes and the interests and motivations of small social groups. The comparative evaluation of such competing explanations of such evidence would require additional evidence for intervening stages between the explanations, be they conspiracies or unintended consequences of complex interactions between social groups and the evidence. Conspiracy theorists would have to explain the absence of such evidence by the same old conspiracy, while alternative explanations would usually be able to come up with evidence for the unintended processes that lead to correlations between events and interests. Ceteris paribus scientific cognitive values would decree that the theories with the broadest scope of evidence, which are also fruitful and precise in being able to lead to the discovery of new evidence and predict some of it precisely, would be preferred to their inferior alternatives.

The skeptical philosophy of historiography denies the scientific cognitive values of the uniquely heterogeneous, uncoerced and large historiographic community and their hierarchic precedence over non-cognitive values. Instead, it endorses value pluralism and denies the precedence of cognitive values over other values. If skeptics interpret historiography as having the form of a narrative, they would claim that one narrative is as good as another, and therefore there is no substantial difference between historiography and fiction. For Hayden White, “historical narratives ... are verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in connection with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences.”15 White concluded that the choice between competing historiographic narratives is undertaken on aesthetic grounds, and claimed that the existence of the Holo-
caust is dependent on political interpretation. Spitzer claimed that the guilt or innocence of Trotsky is dependent on moral values rather than on historical evidence.

As a description or explanation of historiography, skepticism is manifestly inconsistent with the history and sociology of historiography. The existence of an uncoerced uniquely heterogeneous community of historians that reached consensus on many beliefs and cognitive values for over two centuries must be an incredible mystery for the skeptics. Yet, clearly, historians do think they can prove that there was a Holocaust and that Stalin and his minions were suffering from paranoid delusions. Skeptics would find this consensus puzzling. Had the skepticism been right, historiography should have been sociologically as fragmented as literature or art are.

The skeptical interpretation of historiography is founded to a large extent on pre-scientific historiography and philosophy of history, prior to the emergence of uncoerced uniquely heterogeneous consensus in historiography. Scientific cognitive values and the resulting historiographic beliefs did not come to dominate historiography overnight. They emerged first in Germany at the turn of the 19th century, initially in biblical criticism, philology and textual criticism and only later in historiography with Ranke, and traveled westward during the 19th century. Pre-scientific historiography, written for example by Gibbon, Macaulay and Michelet, was sometimes well-written and consequently had a wide reading public and a market niche during the 19th century even if it did not adhere to the new Rankean standards. But contemporary historians regard such historiography as pre-scientific, or even “prehistoric,” to use Elton’s phrase. The conflation of a historiography constituted of scientific, cognitive values with pre-critical historiography is underlaid by an even deeper misunderstanding of the nature of historiographic research, a confusion of historiography with textbooks about the past. Literary critics may claim that there is nothing outside the text, that the text is all we have. But in historiography, including the historiography of literature, we certainly have far more than self-contained historiographic texts. The text refers through footnotes to evidence. The historian infers historiography from evidence, and documents it by means of the footnote. The alternative is the therapeutic invention of historiography, preferring therapy to truth, and concluding with “Springtime for Hitler.”
NOTES

2 Ibid.
11 Brockmann, ibid.
13 Ibid.