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# Postmodernism, historical denial, and history education: What Frank Ankersmit can offer to history didactics

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*Abstract: History educators frequently ignore, or engage only reluctantly and cautiously with postmodernism. This is arguably because postmodernism is frequently accused of assaulting the epistemological foundations of history as an academic discipline, fostering a climate of cultural relativism, encouraging the proliferation of revisionist histories, and providing fertile ground for historical denial. In the Philosophy of History discipline, Frank Ankersmit has become one of those scholars most closely associated with 'postmodern history'. This paper explores Ankersmit's 'postmodern' philosophy of history, particularly his key notion of 'narrative substances'; what it might do for our approach to a problem such as historical denial; and what possibilities it presents for history didactics.*

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# Introduction

History educators frequently ignore, or engage only reluctantly and cautiously with postmodernism. Scholarship that directly addresses postmodernism and its implications for history curriculum or didactics is limited in scope and volume (the book by Segall, Heilman, & Cherryholmes, 2006; and the paper by Seixas, 2000, being among the very few exceptions). This should not be surprising, given that postmodernism has been accused of assaulting the epistemological foundations of history as an academic discipline (MacRaild & Taylor, 2004), fostering a climate of cultural relativism (Evans, 1997), and encouraging the proliferation of revisionist histories (Windschuttle, 1996). More importantly, for the Holocaust historian Deborah Lipstadt (1994), postmodernism has provided fertile ground for historical denial. This should certainly concern history educators, given the attention awarded to topics such as the rise of German National Socialism, WWII, and the Holocaust in many European (and for that matter, Anglo-Saxon) History curricula; and broader concerns for challenging historical amnesia through history education, particularly in nations that might be described as post-conflict and/or post-colonial societies, with disputed or conflicting traumatic histories (see for example: Ahonen, 2013, on Finland, South Africa, and Bosnia-Herzegovina; Parkes, 2007, on Australia; Zanazanian & Moisan, 2012, on Quebec, Canada). However, Lipstadt's claim that postmodernism fosters historical denial deserves to be scrutinised more closely. In the Philosophy of History discipline, or Historical Theory field (as he prefers), Frank Ankersmit has become one of those scholars most closely associated with 'postmodern history'. Although he refuses the 'strong' postmodern position advocated by scholars such as Keith Jenkins (1991, 1999, 2003) – which he makes clear in his response to Zagorin (Ankersmit, 1990, p. 278) – Ankersmit has none-the-less found himself in various academic debates defending what we might call a 'moderate' postmodern approach to history (see his reply to Zagorin: Ankersmit, 1990). In this paper, I want to explore Ankersmit's 'postmodern' philosophy of history; what it might do for our approach to the problem of historical denial; and the possibilities for a postmodern approach to history didactics. The paper will proceed by way of the following movements. First, I will examine the claim that historical denial is encouraged by postmodern relativism. Second, I will explore Ankersmit's standing as a postmodern philosopher of history, and provide a brief, and necessarily selective, articulation of the key ideas in Ankersmit's philosophy, paying particular attention to the distinction he makes between 'referential statements' and 'narrative substances'. Finally, I will consider the implications of Ankersmit's philosophy of history for history didactics, particularly what it suggests about how educators might engage with the problem of historical denial. My goal is to consider how postmodern philosophy of history, at least of the moderate kind advocated by Ankersmit, might assist to identify and challenge, rather than foster or exacerbate, historical denial; and thus offer an approach that could be useful to history educators.

## Postmodernism, Relativism and Historical Denial

As a philosophical force in the field of history and historiography, postmodernism has been described as an attack on historical reason (Appleby, Hunt, & Jacob, 1994), that is wilfully obscurant and politically paralysing (Roth, 1995), while having little to do with the practice of professional historians (McCullagh, 2004), or to offer serious historiography (Zagorin, 2000). One area of historical scholarship that has presented a particular problem for the postmodern approach to history is Holocaust studies. According to Holocaust historian Deborah Lipstadt, postmodernists have placed themselves in a predicament that renders them silent on questions about the status of events such as the Holocaust. In her book *Denying the Holocaust: The assault on memory and truth,* Lipstadt (1994) aims her sights on what she calls "deconstructionism", arguing that it has created conditions in academic circles that have fostered Holocaust denial (p. 18). In the United States, deconstruction — as it is more typically labelled — is associated with the Yale School of literary theory. One of the Yale School's most famous members was Paul de Man, whose posthumously discovered WWII writings for a collaborationist newspaper in Belgium – including one that was explicitly anti-Semitic – permanently damaged his reputation. Deconstruction was further developed by, and is perhaps now most closely associated with, the late French-Algerian 'Postmodern' Philosopher, Jacques Derrida, whose reading of de Man's work has been criticized as bordering on the apologetic with reference to de Man's collaborationist past (LaCapra, 2000), further muddying the debate over postmodernism and the question of historical denial.

Lipstadt (1994) argues that "deconstructionism," which stands in for her as a symbol for all forms of postmodernist theory, adopts the following view:

> *[…] that there was no bedrock thing such as experience. Experience was mediated through one's language. The scholars who supported this deconstructionist approach were neither deniers themselves nor sympathetic to the denier's attitudes; most had no trouble identifying Holocaust denial as disingenuous. But because deconstructionism argued that experience was relative and nothing was fixed, it created an atmosphere of permissiveness towards questioning the meaning of historical events and made it hard for its proponents to assert that there was anything "off limits" for this skeptical approach. The legacy of this thinking was evident when students had to confront the issue. Far too many of them found it impossible to recognize Holocaust denial as a movement with no scholarly, intellectual, or rational validity. (p. 18)*

Richard J. Evans (1997) agrees with Lipstadt's assessment of postmodernism, arguing that:

> *[…] the increase in scope and intensity of the Holocaust deniers' activities since the mid-1970s has among other things reflected the postmodernist intellectual climate, above all in the USA, in which scholars have increasingly denied texts had any fixed meaning, and have argued instead that meaning is supplied by the reader. (pp. 240–241)*

It is not difficult to source postmodernist literature that affirms the view that text is always open to multiple readings, and that it is impossible to develop a singular, certain, originary, or infallible interpretation (see for example: Derrida, 1978/1993). Jean-Francois Lyotard (1979) provided the most succinct and quoted articulation of this idea when he defined postmodernism as "incredulity towards metanarratives" (p.27), emphasising that the postmodern condition is experienced as "a crisis of cultural authority" (de Alba, Gonzalez-Gaudiano, Lankshear, & Peters, 2000, p. 128), emerging alongside a proliferation of micro-narratives, accompanied by an uncertainty about who or what we should believe. This state of affairs has undoubtedly provoked strong concerns that have resulted in some scholars taking an immediately dismissive attitude towards postmodernism. This is particularly true among 'traditional' historians, who have had a reputation, at various times, for being hostile towards theory of any kind (Clark, 2004). However, Evan's position has received criticism for suggesting too strong a causal relation. Guttenplan (2001) chides Evans for asserting that the growing presence of Holocaust denial is an effect of the spread of postmodern theory. Guttenplan argues for a more complex picture, noting that David Irving, and alleged Holocaust deniers like him, are rarely if ever postmodernists, though they may have capitalized on the climate of scepticism towards truth claims fostered by postmodern theory, and used it as a device to legitimate their revisionism. However, Guttenplan sees this as a form of academic opportunism, rather than a direct consequence of the existence of postmodern theory. Gutteplan's distinction is an important one.

Methodologically, we should note that revisionists tend to reject the postmodernist principle that texts are open to multiple interpretations. Instead, one is far more likely to find them arguing that every text has actually only a single meaning or it is devoid of meaning altogether (Guttenplan, 2001). Holocaust denial, as one particular form of revisionism, works to put forward its own interpretation of 'the sources' as an exclusive reading rather than one possible interpretation among many. In my home context of Australia, this same practice is evident in the two published volumes of *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* (Windschuttle, 2002, 2009). Windschuttle (1996) admits to being opposed to postmodern social theory in all its forms, but his work takes a much more 'black and white' view of historical evidence than is typical among professional historians (his dismissive stance towards oral testimony being a marked example), raising legitimate questions about his own status as a 'denier' of Indigenous Australian history (Taylor, 2008). Further, it might be possible to understand the rise

of right-wing revisionism – such as Windschuttle's volumes on Aboriginal history –
as a reaction to, rather than a direct outgrowth of, the cultural pluralism espoused
within postmodernism (see Parkes, 2011, Chapter Four). It may well be that some
Holocaust Denial literature, underpinned by a re-assertion of Aryan superiority,
emerges from a sense of White disenfranchisement, and a concern that
multiculturalism has weakened the imagined unity of the nation (Parkes, 2009). Thus,
postmodern theory may have some part to play in the historical denial process, but not
necessarily the one supposed by Evans.

It is certainly clear that postmodern theory challenged naïve empiricism, and the
confident 'realism' that often underpinned the default mode of Twentieth Century
historiography. Further, postmodernists would argue that traumatic events, such as the
Holocaust, demand and resist representation simultaneously. Traumatic occurrences
work as "limit events" that "test our traditional conceptual and representational
categories" (Friedlander, 1997, p. 389). LaCapra (1998) argues that "the traumatic
event has its greatest and most clearly justifiable effect on the victim, but in different
ways it also affects everyone who comes in contact with it" (pp. 8–9). For historians
there is a generally agreed ethical imperative to represent traumatic events like the
Holocaust as accurately as possible. Friedlander (1997) advocates just such a position,
arguing that the problem of historical representation is not solely an aesthetic or
intellectual concern, but also an issue of morality. We have a moral obligation to tell
'the truth' but this must be tempered by Oliver's (2001) assertion that testimony of
trauma is both a "necessity and impossibility" (p. 53). It is a necessity because a new
sort of violence against the victims is committed if we forget the tragedies that have
occurred. This is particularly the case for an event like the Holocaust that had a wide-
ranging impact, and raises ethical and political questions that demand attention. Yet,
historical representation is also an impossibility, because no representation of the
trauma can ever fully capture its totality; there will always be silences and blind spots.
Along these lines, Kansteiner (1997) has compared Auschwitz to "an earthquake
which destroys all seismographic devices and therefore cannot be measured and
represented within the applicable sign systems . . . [leaving us with] a vague but
powerful feeling of its enormity and unrepresentability" (p. 416).

This sense of a crisis of representation underpins much postmodern history. It is
based on the self-evident assumption that part of the limit condition imposed on
historiographic representation is that the depiction of an event is never the event itself;
though as Baudrillard (1995) argues, it may sometimes be confused with it. Thus, we
may learn about the traumatic past through its representation, and we may be affected
by our encounter with that representation, but we can never claim to have experienced
what happened. Our experience is of the historiographic representation, not the event
itself. No matter how much we are moved by the testimony (and even changed by it),
we remain at best onlookers, whose understanding of the event is always limited by
the interpretive horizon of the "tradition" we operate within (Gadamer, 1992) or what
Kellner (1997) has called our "culturally available models" (p. 398); the socio-
historically constituted sense-making technologies we use to construct our knowledge
of the past. Baudrillard's (1994) theory of hyperreality – when representation appears

more real than reality – is thus no dupe for alleged Holocaust deniers such as David Irving, who are said to engage in "massive falsification of historical evidence, manipulation of facts, and denial of truth" (Evans, 2002, p. 10), and deliberate "misrepresentation, mistranslation, misleading phrasing, and imperfectly varnished deceit" (Guttenplan, 2001, p. 223). Postmodernism may have opened the way for radical scepticism of all historical claims, but it is altogether another claim to suggest that postmodernism causes or fosters historical denial. In fact, I hope to show in the next section, that Ankersmit's postmodern philosophy of history may actually be useful to identify and challenge, rather than foster or exacerbate, historical denial.

## Ankersmit's Postmodern Philosophy of History

In order to consider what a postmodern approach to the problem of historical denial might be, and how this might be taken up in History education, it is first necessary to make some choices about how we are going to define postmodern history. Explorations of postmodernism and history turn up a number of recurrent names, including Keith Jenkins, Alun Munslow, Hayden White, Arthur Danto, Hans Kellner, and Frank Ankersmit. Jenkins arguably occupies the most 'radical' end of the spectrum, arguing that postmodernism ushers the end of history as both grand story and as academic discipline (Jenkins, 1999, 2003). Munslow takes a slightly more careful stance, and has certainly been keen to foster 'experiments' in postmodern history scholarship, but tends to offer works that are largely synoptic overviews of the field (Munslow, 1997, 2003, 2012). White may be the seminal narrativist, but he is actually an "unrepenting structuralist" who has strongly influenced postmodernists, but arguably isn't one himself (see Ankersmit, 2001, p. 252; also the interview with Hayden White in Domanska, 1998). Ankersmit, Emeritus Professor of History and Historical Theory at Groningen University in the Netherlands, is a thoughtful and insightful voice among the postmodernist camp, whose work "has always been (and indeed is) original and complex in its own right" (Icke, 2010, p. 552) . Although there has been some recent criticism of Ankersmit's turn towards 'historical experience' as an apparent move away from the radicality of his earlier postmodern concern with 'representation' (Icke, 2012), Icke (2010) maintains the usefulness of Ankersmit's 'narrative substances' as a legacy for postmodern historians.

The idea of 'narrative substances' was first advocated by Ankersmit in *Narrative Logic* (Ankersmit, 1983), a text influenced by the analytical tradition in philosophy, but failed to find the traction that it would later, when Ankersmit re-presented it in the context of a more obviously postmodern position in *Historical Representation* (Ankersmit, 2001). According to Ankersmit, 'narrative substances' are proposals for how we should understand the past. They stand in distinction from 'referential statements' that make empirically verifiable claims about the world. 'There is a gun on the table' works as a referential statement (we can check the world to see if it is true or false through observation of the table). 'There *was* a gun on the table' is also a referential statement (albeit one that is a little harder to check; but a statement we

would attempt to check as historians by looking for traces that were left behind, such as a photograph of the table, a document from the time period such as a diary that attests to the gun being on the table, or an interview with eye witnesses who can provide oral testimony that helps us determine whether or not the gun was on the table in question at the moment they were viewing it). However, a narrative that attempts to answer the question of why the gun is/was on the table already starts to go beyond the evidence into a form of inductive or adductive speculation. That speculation produces a 'narrative substance'. Narrative substances exist "as a property of a 'picture' of the past" (Icke, 2010, p. 554). Historical explanation is always made up of one or more of these narrative substances. Unlike the referential statement, which can be examined to be true or false, each narrative proposal may be "fruitful, well-considered, intelligent, to the point (or not), and so on, but not . . . true or false" (Ankersmit, 1990, p. 282). Ankersmit (2001) attempts to make this problem clear in his example of the Renaissance. 'The Renaissance' is an example of a narrative substance. It is a proposal for how we should see a particular aspect of the past. The Renaissance, as a narrative proposal, invites us to view certain past events in a particular way. This same series of events could have been ordered, described, selected, defined, periodized, or segregated in some other way. While 'the facts' (or the set of available referential statements) that we may draw about this particular 'period' of history may include references to Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and a host of other 'important' figures and their contributions to the intellectual and cultural life of their times, the narrative of the Renaissance, which furnishes these people and events with meaning, arises from particular interpretations of 'the facts'. Thus, any debate about what the Renaissance was or means is not a debate about the past as it happened, but about historiographic or narrative interpretations of it. As Ankersmit (2001) so carefully argues, "interpretation is not translation. The past is not a text that has to be translated into narrative historiography; it has to be interpreted" (p. 237). Further, he asserts that "narrative interpretations apply to the past, but do not correspond or refer to it (as statements do)" (Ankersmit, 2001, p. 239). As noted previously, "proposals," as narrative interpretations of the past, "may be useful, fruitful, or not, but cannot be either true or false" (Ankersmit, 2001, p. 241). The usefulness of a proposal is always determined by comparing it with other proposals, and considering which is the most comprehensive, generative, insightful, etc. These proposals are not true or false in themselves. This is because in Ankersmit's view, only an individual referential statement can be verified as true or false.

Quite powerfully, Ankersmit (2001) also argues that:

> *[…] a historical narrative is a historical narrative only insofar as the (metaphorical) meaning of the historical narrative in its totality transcends the (literal) meaning of the sum of its individual statements. (p. 243)*

Where Ankersmit's logic does not fit the text being explored, the set of statements is probably better described by the term chronicle, a point Ankersmit borrows from

Hayden White (1973). This position is affirmed by Rüsen (1996) who has argued that "the peculiar cultural phenomenon called history essentially depends upon the cultural practice of narration" (p. 12). Accepting such a premise, Ankersmit (2001) asserts that "the ultimate challenge for both historical writing and the historian is not factual or ethical, but aesthetic" (p. 176). Viewed in this way, historical research only becomes history as the traces of the past are turned into a series of referential statements that are subsequently given meaning within a narrative structure. Jenkins (1995) expresses the strong version of this narrativist position when he states that, "most historiography is the imposition of meaningful form onto a meaningless past" (p. 137).

Recognising the historian's act of narrative imposition on the past does not deny the importance of attempting to represent and make sense of it. We might assert, once again, that some traumatic events, such as the genocide of the Jewish population of Western Europe by the Nazi regime, demand that we provide meaning for their existence whether we want to or not, whether impossible or not. We account for such events by transforming facts that we can derive from traces left behind into a set of referential statements, that we then draw upon to construct our narrative. Thus, the idea of 'the Holocaust' operates at the level of narrative representation. It sits beyond the sum of referential statements that can be made, attempting to provide 'meaning' to the acts of lethal violence committed against European Jewry during World War II through the particularities of its aesthetic construction. The aesthetic construction of the Holocaust has not been stable since it was first developed as a narrative proposal for understanding the fate of Jewish populations in Europe during WWII (Schwarz, 1999). Lucy Russell's (2006) insightful exploration of the struggles over how 'the Holocaust' gets defined – whether it should include all those killed by the Nazi regime, including homosexuals, gypsies, and political dissidents, or just the Jewish populations – points exactly to the way 'the Holocaust' functions as a narrative substance.

For Ankersmit, like White, the problem of representation at the heart of Holocaust history is ultimately a question of the 'appropriateness' or 'respectfulness' of the aesthetic form. So respectfulness must do justice to the trauma that occurred. From a postmodern perspective, at the level of the narrative, the meaning of a set of statements is always an (at least partially) open question (and 'relative' to the reader or writer attempting understanding and interpretation). However, although this suggests that each historian will develop a narrative that makes the set of factual statements meaningful to themselves and their communities, interpretation has socially and linguistically imposed limits. White (1997) has asserted that while a neo-Nazi revisionist might be able to represent the extermination of the Europe's Jewish populations in some satirical form, this would never be acceptable for a serious historian, who is likely to depict the events as tragedy; though we see this changing as historical distance from the events increases (Schwarz, 1999). Certainly, an historian's narrative proposals are produced in a kind of dialogue with the sum of referential statements, and may be constrained by them. Importantly however, Ankersmit contends that although interpretations may be challenged by alternative interpretations (narratives by competing narratives), only individual statements can be (and should

be) challenged by 'the facts'. Thus, Holocaust denial is only such if it can be falsified at the level of the statement. Interestingly, this is precisely what Richard J. Evans put into play when he took the witness stand in the Irving libel case. In this case, David Irving filed a libel suit against Deborah Lipstadt and Penguin Books (her British publisher) for publishing her book *Denying the Holocaust,* because within it Irving is described as a Holocaust denier. Evans was called as an expert in modern history (along with other historians), and annihilated Irving's suspect narratives by demolishing the statements upon which they stood, showing that the claims of reference that they intended were selective, false, or inaccurately rendered. If Irving had built his narrative interpretations upon an accurate set of the 'available' factual statements (regarding the extermination of the Jews of Europe by the Nazi regime), Evans would have had to accept that Irving's interpretation could not be discounted as a possible rendering of the past. Evans could have provided a more plausible interpretation of 'the facts' himself, but this would not, of itself, lead to a verdict that Irving was a Holocaust denier. What Evans showed, without consciously accepting any of Ankersmit's premises, was that at the level of the referential statement, Irving's research was deficient. This did not stop Evans arguing that there were better interpretations of 'the facts' than the ones Irving provided, which for the most part was an argument accepted by the judge in the trial (Guttenplan, 2001), but it was Irving's referential statements, rather than his narrative proposals, that betrayed him as a Holocaust denier in the eyes of the court. Irving lost his libel suit, had his reputation as a Holocaust denier affirmed, and was ultimately bankrupted by the proceedings.

Returning to the problem of historical writing, it should be underscored that there is a step between the determination of 'statements of fact' and the production of an adequate or plausible narrative interpretation. That step is the determination of what will count as 'evidence' for the specific history that is to be written. If we follow Jenkins (2003), then "nothing is ever intrinsically historical" (p. 39); instead, objects of enquiry can be used as evidence within "any number of [historical] discourses without belonging to any of them" (p. 39). Within the postmodernist approach to history, 'evidence' needs to be understood as distinct from 'facts'. 'Referential statements', as statements of fact, become 'evidence' only when used to support a particular historical interpretation or explanation. The evidence needed to support a particular interpretation is usually only a partial collection of available referential statements determined by the questions that are guiding the research being conducted. For example, it may be a verifiable 'fact' that almost six million Jews were murdered by the Nazi regime during World War II, but this fact becomes 'evidence' only for particular types of historical inquiry. It may be useful if we are exploring questions related to the fate of European Jewish populations in countries where the Nazi regime had gained control, or if we are exploring the National Socialist movement's attitudes and policies towards the Jews. However, it is unlikely to be mobilised as evidence if our question concerned the success of German military strategy during World War II. It might appear in the historical explanation as a statement of what was happening on the home front, but it is unlikely to be critical to an argument that seeks to understand or explain why German strategic decisions on the Russian front met with success or

failure. Tweak the question only slightly and such a 'fact' may suddenly become 'historically significant'. Imagine if the historian had a question about whether or not German military strategy on the Russian front was motivated by a belief that large numbers of the Russian army were Jewish: In such a case, the extermination of European Jewry inside and outside of German borders, as part of a broader policy of the National Socialist regime, would become 'historically significant'. The point of this example is that research questions pre-exist the determination of what will constitute data or evidence (Popkewitz, 2001). Though facts might stimulate the generation of particular research questions, the evidence for a particular historical interpretation is always determined by the question or problem that the historian is attempting to solve or understand. Thus, postmodernists often talk about the evidence being constituted by the researcher's question. What is at stake in such a claim is the 'historical significance' of 'the facts', rather than the facts themselves.

## Implications of Ankersmit's Philosophy for History Didactics

In the previous section I explored a key idea in the moderate postmodern philosophy of history espoused by Frank Ankersmit, namely, the distinction between the 'referential statement' and the historical narrative (or more correctly, 'narrative substance'). I argued, at the risk of over-simplifying Ankersmit, that the referential statement was a claim about the world that could be empirically verified, while narrative substances provide proposals for the past that may be good or bad, partial or thorough, but can't be true or false. It was reported that for Ankersmit, a historical narrative is a historical narrative in-so-far as its argument exceeds the sum of its referential statements. This meant that all historical narratives could be judged for adequacy only by comparing a historical narrative against other historical narratives, to determine "in which of these texts the available historical evidence has been most successfully used" (Ankersmit, 1990, p. 281). That is, which is the most comprehensive (in drawing on the agreed upon set of available referential statements) or the most insightful, fruitful, etc. Ankersmit has particular views about how this set of referential statements may be determined, a point I will return to below. Not only does Ankersmit's philosophy have implications for how we might approach the problem of historical denial (as has been shown above in the examination of the Irving libel case), but also has implications for how we might approach history didactics. I must make clear that to the best of my knowledge, Ankersmit has never considered in writing the didactic implications of his theories, and that the position I will advance should be understood as my interpretation of the pedagogical implications of his ideas. That noted, the important point I want to make is that with Ankersmit's help, we may accept the justified critique of historical representation present in postmodern scholarship, without descending into the problems of an anything-goes relativism that blunts our ability to challenge historical denial. However, I would fall short of making the claim that there is anything radical in what I am about to propose as the implications of Ankersmit's philosophy for the history classroom. If anything, I would

want to suggest that for many history educators the implications might require only a minor reorientation in pedagogical practice. The extent of reorientation required is likely to vary depending on whether the educator is located in a British-inspired analytical-empirical tradition focused strongly on primary source analysis, or a German-inspired social-philosophical tradition more familiar with the use of *historiekultur* in the classroom, both of which have influenced history educators in the Nordic didactic community (Ahonen, 2005).

Perhaps the clearest implication of Ankersmit's philosophy, and subsequent reorientation required, for history didactics is the need to focus our attention on the study of historical writing. Within much of British-inspired history education, such as one finds in my home nation of Australia for example, emphasis is placed on getting students to engage with primary sources. There appears to be a general consensus in the Anglophone history education literature that having students learn the discipline of history, and disciplinary ways of thinking, will help them as critical thinkers in their everyday life (Counsell, 2012; Taylor & Boon, 2012; Wineburg, 2001). This is often advocated as one of the purposes of school history, and why it needs to retain its status as an independent subject. Anyone who has been through history teacher education over the past couple of decades in Australia would most likely have been exposed to source based analysis, and been encouraged to use this as a major aspect of their pedagogical (or didactic) repertoire. While Ankersmit's philosophy would not preclude this focus on primary source materials, and would certainly suggest that it may be a place from which we start to generate 'referential statements', an exclusive focus on primary source analysis would draw the student away from what Ankersmit thinks history is – a narrative that exceeds the sum of its referential statements. Thus, if we take Ankersmit's philosophy seriously, significant attention must be given to engaging with and scrutinising the writings of historians, or what we regularly refer to as secondary accounts. Opportunities to explore secondary accounts abound in the contemporary classroom, appearing in those apparently neutral descriptive textbook passages, in the selective composition of television documentaries, and in the popular prose of internet history websites and magazines. It would take only a slight reorientation from teachers to address each of these secondary accounts as interpretations in their own right. Students would then have the task of differentiating the referential statements from the narrative proposals offered in each of these sources. Such an approach would seem to align well with arguments for the use of *historiekultur* in the classroom, where analysing the various historical narratives we encounter – in the form of historical films, historical fiction, commemoration ceremonies, etc. – is an important feature of the development of historical consciousness (Rüsen, 2004). In the Nordic context, it also sits well with the aim of the current Swedish history syllabus, that demands students should not only develop "the ability to use historical methods", but also to develop "an understanding of how history is used" (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2012, p. 1); and the Danish curriculum requirement to address *historiebevidsthed,* or the consciousness of history in the present. Ankersmit's philosophy provides a justification for exactly

these kinds of curriculum goals, where attention is focused on narrative representations students may encounter through historical culture.

For Ankersmit (1990), the best way to determine the agreed upon set of referential statements is to compare multiple historical narratives (secondary accounts) and see where these narratives overlap. As Ankersmit (1990) notes: "Their overlap determines what historical reality actually is like for this set of texts in accordance with the textual law that what is not interpretation becomes description" (p. 283). Further, this is also the best way, according to Ankersmit, to identify a narrative substance (or a proposal for how we should be looking at the past). For when we compare historical narratives on the same topic, their differences become more obvious. What they have in common is likely to be the agreed upon referential statements, where they differ is likely to be in their narrative substance. This would seem to address the criticism of Ankersmit offered by Lorenz (cited in Anchor, 1999) – that  statements made by historians are often simultaneously representative (descriptive or referential) and normative (embodying narrative substances). Ankersmit's approach can address this concern because it is the comparative analysis which will sift out the referential statements from the narrative substances, a task which might be impossible in examining a single text. Thus, essential to a didactic take up of Ankersmit's philosophy is the teaching of rival narratives. Without the presence of alternative accounts, we are left unable to determine what is factual reference and what is narrative proposal. The rival narratives we use must be well selected, representing a variety of positions on the topic. We must not, for example, get caught using a set of narratives that all come from the same perspective, or we have no way of knowing, using Ankersmit's approach, if we have an accurate set of referential statements to work from (which would make denial harder to detect). Of course, playing between primary and secondary sources can assist in such a process, and we should do that too, but there will be no absolute substitute for engaging with rival narratives. This suggests that a didactic approach built upon Ankersmit's philosophy would place emphasis on historiography and historical representations (the study of the writings of historians) and the public uses of history (an important move that affirms the recent addition of this area in the Swedish History curriculum noted earlier), alongside any emphasis on disciplinary history (the development of apprentice historians through primary source analysis). To engage multiple histories in this way, discerning factual reference from narrative proposal, invites engagement with the political uses of the past (exposed through the identification of rival narrative proposals). This is arguably an issue facing history educators in many nation states today, and a didactic necessity in our increasingly multicultural and religiously diverse societies (see for example, the theme of the forthcoming Yearbook of the International Society for History Didactics: Wojdon, 2013).

## Conclusion

Postmodernism has certainly had an uncomfortable relationship with academic history. In its more extreme forms it would seem to suggest that the historical narrative is simply an ideological imposition on an unrecoverable past; and that without an ability to stand outside of history and culture ourselves, we are left with no ability to judge between competing historical accounts. If we take this 'strong' postmodern stance, then we are indeed left in a state of cultural and moral relativism, in which we have no grounds from which to make judgements about the historical narratives we encounter. In this state, historical denial is free to emerge alongside all other forms of history, and is not easily challenged or evaluated. While there are certainly limitations in Ankersmit's Philosophy of History that scholars are sure to find, his distinction between referential statements and narrative substances does provide a way out of the usual postmodern impasse. Offering a 'moderate' postmodern position, Ankersmit's philosophy affirms the need to teach (and compare) rival historical narratives as a way to understand what can be said with confidence about the past, and to ascertain when what is being said is conjecture (or at least a useful proposal). What Ankersmit's philosophy does implicitly warn us against, is a situation in which we are only exposed to a limited set of accounts. Thus, narratives must be selected wisely if we are to take this approach. Applying Ankersmit's philosophy one need not be afraid of historical denial, for the very encounter with it can assist us to sharpen our historiographic gaze. Far from leaving us silent in the face of historical denial, Ankersmit's moderate postmodern philosophy of history arms us with a useful approach for distinguishing between adequate and inadequate historical accounts of the past without returning to the modernist assumption that histories unproblematically describe the past as it was.

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