

# „FACTS AND FICTION” ON THE CURRENT FUNDAMENTAL CRISIS IN HISTORY

OTTO GERHARD OEXLE

History as a discipline has been in crisis ever since its very beginnings around 1800 and it still finds itself in the same situation today. In the current crisis it is the „postmodern challenge” and „facts and fiction” which are at stake.

## 1.

The British historian Richard J. Evans became known by his book *Death in Hamburg* (1987) which focuses on civic society and politics during the cholera epidemics in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In his polemic *In Defence of History* (1997) which was recently translated into German,<sup>1</sup> he has taken up the fight against „postmodernism” in historiography and history, with such emotiveness that it seems to mask a deep sense of shock. According to Evans the „postmodern challenge” has to be met, since the „linguistic turn” that replaces historical „facts” and „causes” with mere „discourses” has driven the discipline into a fundamental „epistemological crisis” „History” says Evans, quoting three American historians Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob and their book *Telling the Truth about History* from 1994<sup>2</sup> – „has been shaken right down to its scientific and cultural foundations.”<sup>3</sup> Other British and American historians whose voices Evans quotes in his book have argued along similar lines:<sup>4</sup> the „postmodern challenge”, as explained by the British social historian Lawrence Stone in 1991, has thrown the discipline „into a crisis of self-confidence about what it is doing and how it is doing it” And according to the American medievalist Gabrielle M. Spiegel the „dissolution” of history is imminent. There is even a threat of its „murder”, as one Australian historian has claimed (Keith Windshuttle: *The Killing of History. How a Discipline is being Murdered by Literary Critics and Social Theorists*, 1994).

Richard Evans wants to put a stop to these shocking developments. Initially

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<sup>1</sup> Richard J. Evans: *In Defence of History*, London 1997. German translation: *Fakten und Fiktionen. Über die Grundlagen historischer Erkenntnis*, Frankfurt – New York 1998. All quotations are taken from the English original unless otherwise stated. – I would like to thank Gesa Stedman (Berlin) for her meticulous translation.

<sup>2</sup> Joyce Appleby – Lynn Hunt – Margaret Jacob: *Telling the Truth about History*, New York – London 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Evans, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Op. cit., p. 4.

quite in accordance with the postmodernists, he intends to awaken those historians who perhaps have not even become aware of the crisis from their complacency and self-satisfaction, in order to show them how to parry the postmodernists' attacks and finally overcome them. „It is time we historians took responsibility for explaining what we do, how we do it, and why it is worth doing”<sup>5</sup> – almost as if we were the first to have this idea. With this phrase he again quotes the three American historians who, for the same motive, announced „a new theory of objectivity” (1994), a new „practical realism”.<sup>6</sup> However, this approach does not find Evans' favour since it rejects the notion „that the past can impose its reality on the historian through these [material] remains”<sup>7</sup> But it is exactly this role of the past, which Evans considers to be the most important and at the same time the most commonsensical view of history. For him, it is a „fact” that „the past” exists and that „the documents do have an integrity of their own, they do indeed „speak for themselves” „The constraints that past reality imposes through them on the historian are more than merely negative.”<sup>8</sup> The historian, taught thus about the past by being instructed by the past, can „really” know history. In Evans' opinion, the question what historical facts actually are is easily answered. Facts are „objects” in the past. „A historical fact is something that happened in history and can be verified as such through the traces history has left behind. Whether or not a historian actually carried out the act of verification is irrelevant to its factuality: it really is there entirely independently of the historian.”<sup>9</sup> At the end of his deliberations on the „postmodernist thinkers” Evans therefore remains „optimistic that objective historical knowledge is both desirable and attainable” And in the face of the „postmodernist challenge” he therefore looks „humbly at the past” and „despite” all these challenges the past „really happened, and we really can, if we are very scrupulous and careful and self-critical, find out how it happened and reach some tenable though always less than final conclusions about what it all meant”<sup>10</sup>

## 2.

On the basis of the statements I have just quoted one might think that the debate over „facts and fiction” is largely an American and British problem but it soon becomes clear that the quarrel has also gathered momentum in Germany.

In Germany, too, the belief in facts expressed by historians and historians

<sup>5</sup> Evans (as in note 1), p. 12. As a quotation in Appleby – Hunt – Jacob (as in note 2), p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Appleby - Hunt – Jacob (as in note 2), p. 247ff.

<sup>7</sup> Evans (as in note 1), p. 115 and p. 131.

<sup>8</sup> Op. cit., p. 116.

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit., p. 76.

<sup>10</sup> Op. cit., p. 252 and p. 253.

of law has come under attack. The historian Michael Stolleis, a specialist in legal history, has recently written in his booklet entitled *Rechtsgeschichte als Kunstprodukt. Zur Entbehrlichkeit von „Begriff” und „Tatsache”* (1997) is „only [!] a learned variety of the species «poet/author», basing his work on older texts and signs”; and: behind the so-called „facts” „nothing more [!] [...] than linguistic messages are hidden, in which one generally believes for pragmatic reasons”<sup>11</sup>

On the opposite side, Germans also imploringly demand that „the facts be rescued” – states the medievalist Werner Paravicini in his treatise „Rettung aus dem Archiv?” (1998). Paravicini writes that „the fact” is „the pillar, the fundamental element of all history as an academic discipline”; but it is exactly the „fact” that has been dissolved by the „postmodernists” as in an acid bath. Modern historiography is therefore in danger of „succumbing to the creepers of theoretical confusion”<sup>12</sup> Paravicini, like Evans, fights against „postmodern arbitrariness” and against the „self-destruction of history” that allegedly follows from it. He therefore calls for „the rescue of history”, which will occur through the „rescue of the fact”<sup>13</sup> There exists, he says, „an irreducible quality in facts, which is absolutely fundamental and which cannot be denied”, and a „pragmatic evidence, which one should not be talked out of” Most of all, according to Paravicini, the „primary fact [...] must be reinvested with its dignity – as unbelievable as this may sound” Furthermore: „The fact will be saved because it has to be saved.” And by „rediscovering the fact” one will also rediscover „the truth”

### 3.

This quarrel about „the past” allegedly takes the historian by the hand in order to show him the truth about the historical past, the quarrel about „irreducible” facts existing independently of the historian, about „primary facts” and their „dignity” – or about the mere fictional quality of „the” past and of the real is remarkable as soon as one judges it from the outside.

(1) It is remarkable, firstly, because of the assurance of the protagonists on both sides and because of their *lack of interest in the weaknesses and deficiencies of their own positions*. Where, for example, on the part of the fact-historians is the question concerning the conditions of the possibility of knowledge of pre-existing „facts”, which are independent of the historian and moreover have long since passed, and their „truth” or indeed the possibility of knowledge of „the past” as

<sup>11</sup> Michael Stolleis: *Rechtsgeschichte als Kunstprodukt. Zur Entbehrlichkeit von „Begriff” und „Tatsache”*, Baden-Baden 1997, p. 16 and p. 27.

<sup>12</sup> Werner Paravicini: „Rettung aus dem Archiv? Eine Betrachtung aus Anlaß der 700-Jahrfeier der Lübecker Tese”, in *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Lübeckische Geschichte und Altertumskunde* 78 (1998), pp. 11-46, p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> Op. cit., p. 31ff.

such? The question is not even posed, just as if it were unnecessary to discuss – and as if no discussion of it had ever taken place. On the opposing side, the insouciance of the „postmodernists” surprises, with which the challengers not only accept a reduction of epistemological complexity on their part, but give up, by cancelling the difference between fact and fiction, any regulating idea of „truth” And by cancelling the difference between historians and poets or writers they question the status of „history” as an academic discipline, thus abandoning and relinquishing it.<sup>14</sup> This explains the understandably violent reaction of the opponents. One may think it is an exaggeration that Richard Evans heavy-handedly plays the „Auschwitz”-card („Auschwitz was not a discourse”),<sup>15</sup> one may shake one’s head when in the introduction to the German edition of his book and with regard to the „postmodernist theoreticians” he gives us a warning reminder of how German history subjected itself to the National Socialists and the East German SED-Regime,<sup>16</sup> almost as if Nazi-inspired or Marxist historians had been precursors of „postmodernity” But Evans’ indignation becomes understandable when one considers the practical consequences of the postmodern attitude. The task in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as the American philosopher Hilary Putnam recently stated, „is not to repeat the mistakes of the twentieth century. Thinking of reason as just a repressive notion is certainly not going to help us to do that. [...] [D]econstruction without reconstruction is irresponsibility”<sup>17</sup> But is the belief in pre-existing facts, in the real existence of historical facts, in the reality of *the* past and the possibility that we may know it „wie es eigentlich gewesen” (as it really was) as a „reconstruction” of the real the only possible answer to the challenges posed by the „postmodernists”?

(2) Secondly, it is remarkable that the debate over „facts and fiction” is wholly related to the present, i.e. that it is conducted *without any regard whatsoever to the history of science*. But haven’t all these positions been taken up long ago? The notion of „rescuing the facts” for instance? Wasn’t that Leopold von Ranke’s programme? „My basic idea is [...] to perceive, to penetrate and to represent the facts as they are. The truth lies in the perception of the facts” – wrote Leopold von Ranke to his brother Heinrich in a letter dated 21 November 1824. Ranke’s famous „Zeigen, wie es eigentlich gewesen” (1824) requires no discussion

<sup>14</sup> See Ernst Hanisch: „Die linguistische Wende. Geschichtswissenschaft und Literatur”, in Wolfgang Hardtwig – Hans-Ulrich Wehler (eds.): *Kulturgeschichte Heute*, Göttingen 1996, pp. 212-230.

<sup>15</sup> Evans (as in note 1), p. 124.

<sup>16</sup> Evans, *Fakten und Fiktionen*, p. 7ff.

<sup>17</sup> Hilary Putnam: *Renewing Philosophy*, Cambridge/Mass. – London 1992, p. 132f. – Cf. also Ernst Cassirer’s criticism of Heidegger’s philosophy (1945): Ernst Cassirer: *Der Mythos des Staates. Philosophische Grundlagen politischen Verhaltens*, Frankfurt 1985, p. 382ff.

since this statement is quoted often enough as legitimation in the relevant contexts. But no one ever pays attention to what the sole basis for the possibility of such a programme was, namely the assumption that knowledge of ideas is based on transcendence or metaphysics, a „religious belief in history” therefore,<sup>18</sup> as it existed with Leopold von Ranke as a personal conviction: the historian knows history „as it really was” because he recognises God’s ideas as they are realised in history, e.g. in the peoples and nations (i.e. by participating in God’s spirit). But how, after the rapidly occurring loss of religious certainties which had already set in before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, can the knowledge of facts in the sense of „as they really were” be constituted by an academic discipline? Certainly, the original context of the term „fact” in German is theological (as late as the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century): „facts” are the result of God’s action; consequently, „facts” are won by experience and refer to the correspondence between the history of the world and the history of God’s saving grace.<sup>19</sup> But this notion does indeed go back quite a long way. Even Friedrich Nietzsche could easily call Ranke „the born classic advocate of any causa fortior” and could mock him as the „brightest of all the bright «realists»”<sup>20</sup> And against the Rankeans and Neo-Rankeans of his time and their obsession with facts he calmly denounces these „facts” as „facta ficta” and, without claiming that no „history” had ever existed, he asserts the absolute fictitiousness of everything historians call „history” „A historian has to do, not with what actually happened, but only with events supposed to have happened: for only the latter have produced an effect. [...] His theme, the so-called world history, is opinions about supposed actions and their supposed motives, which in turn give rise to further opinions and actions, the reality of which is, however, at once vaporised again and produces an effect only as vapour – a continual generation and pregnancy of phantoms over the impenetrable mist of unfathomable reality. All historians speak of things which have never existed except in imagination.”<sup>21</sup>

Of course, every historian may even today choose consciously or unconsciously – to defend, in Rankean terms, the possibility of knowing facts, which exist independently, and to defend the knowability of „the” past „as it really was” Or, following Nietzsche, he or she may consciously or unconsciously choose to argue for the fictional quality of historical „knowledge” But is not it a

<sup>18</sup> Wolfgang Hardtwig: „Geschichtsreligion – Wissenschaft als Arbeit – Objektivität. Der Historismus in neuer Sicht”, in *Historische Zeitschrift* 252 (1991), p. 1-32.

<sup>19</sup> P. Simons, article on „fact” („Tatsache”), in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* 10 (1998), columns 910-916, column 910.

<sup>20</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche: *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1887), in *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, vol. 5, Munich 1980, p. 387.

<sup>21</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche: *Daybreak. Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, transl. by R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge 1997, No. 307 (1881), p. 156.

requirement of intellectual honesty to be aware of the historicity of these positions, and to be aware that these two contradictory positions taken up by Ranke and Nietzsche have long been the object of extended controversies and that different approaches have always existed and continue to do so?

(3) Thirdly, and this is also extraordinary, that *these different approaches, which were developed a long time ago, have obviously fallen into oblivion.*

Gustav Droysen, who in 1857 was the first to work out what he called „Historik”, i.e. a theory of historical knowledge, already counted the debate over facts and fiction among the „*aporemata*”, that is among the catalogue of wrongly posed questions.<sup>22</sup> For Droysen both positions were inadequate. Knowledge of „*the past*” was impossible since, as Droysen had already explained in 1857, in so far as what has already occurred is „of an external nature it belongs to the past and in so far as it has not passed it does not pertain to history but to the present”. And „in the archives [...] we do not find history but what lies there are the current states and administrative affairs in all their unpleasant extent, no more history than the many blobs of paint on a palette make up a painting” The fundamental question of „Historik” – according to Droysen – cannot lie in the aim of gathering „facts”; rather it has to direct itself towards the „transposition” with which „these affairs are turned into history, i.e. what occurred externally and according to other categories can be won for the processes of memory, of historical consciousness, of understanding” This attitude is modelled on a critical stance which follows Immanuel Kant. The intention, emphatically proclaimed by historical and contemporary historians alike „to simply let the facts speak” is, and I am still quoting Droysen, naive; since it overlooks the idea that „the facts do not speak at all” except through him or her who „has become aware of and understood them”, thus by him or her who has understood „that facts per se do not exist” „Historical truth” can therefore never be an „absolute truth” What is „historically true” can only ever be „something relative”, what is historically known is never a true „reproduction” „History is not the sum of everything that occurred, not the course of events but knowledge of what happened.”

But this knowledge is not arbitrary, it is not simply „fiction”. History is an empirical discipline, „the science of history” is „a result of empirical experience and research”<sup>23</sup> However, this empirical foundation does not refer to „history” but to the historical material, or, in Droysen’s words from 1857. „What is given to historical experience and research is not the past – that has passed –, but what has

<sup>22</sup> Johann Gustav Droysen: *Historik. Rekonstruktion der ersten vollständigen Fassung der Vorlesungen (1857); Grundriß der Historik in der ersten handschriftlichen (1857/58) und in der letzten gedruckten Fassung (1882)*, edition by Peter Leyh, Stuttgart – Bad Cannstatt 1977. This and the following quotations to be found on pp. 3f, 8, 11, 69, 218, 283, 397.

<sup>23</sup> Op. cit., p. 397.

remained of the past here and now.” Historical material can be defined as such, that remains of „that present” which historians analyse or which has been handed down for memorial purposes. The findings and outcome of historical studies are therefore not reproductions of the past but „sign systems [...] – an imaginary world”, as Droysen put it in 1878.<sup>24</sup> Neither do we deal with „reproductions” of a passed reality nor with „fiction” but rather with knowledge as „sign”, „imagination” and „representation” We need to differentiate between what *already happened* (the „past”) and what is *given* (the historical material as a basis for the historian’s empirical work) and *history* – which is not a re-construction but a construction, an imaginary model – not an arbitrary one, of course, but one founded on empirical study.

## 4.

Droysen’s „Historik” was never printed as a book by its creator but merely held as a series of lectures which were published as late as 1937. Droysen’s „pioneering achievement in the theory of science and the teaching of history”<sup>25</sup> was therefore not destined to be noticed. And even in their own period Droysen’s lectures on „Historik” (held seventeen times in all between 1857 and 1882/83) left his colleagues shaking their heads and found little echo with students.<sup>26</sup> Against the seeming plausibility of Ranke’s „*Wie es eigentlich gewesen*”, Droysen’s „Historik” stood little chance, based as it was on a Kantian criticism, probably because this notion (and this is still the case today) goes against the everyday, „natural” view of science that scientific and academic knowledge is always a reflection, a reproduction of „external” reality.<sup>27</sup> In Ranke’s opinion this corresponds with the idea that the most important condition for scientific and academic knowledge lies in „the dissolution of the self and letting only the objects and the powerful forces appear”<sup>28</sup> For Droysen on the other hand the maxim „only the thoughtless is objective” held true.<sup>29</sup>

The fact that Droysen’s „Historik” was in a sense unavailable meant that the great theory debates since the 1880s had to reformulate a Kantian approach to

<sup>24</sup> Johann Gustav Droysen: „Philosophie der Geschichte”, in *Jahresberichte der Geschichtswissenschaft* 1 (1878), pp. 626-635, p. 628. Cf. also Droysen: *Historik*, p. 421 (1882).

<sup>25</sup> Leyh (as in note 22), p. IX.

<sup>26</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>27</sup> Ernst Cassirer: *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit*, vol. 1, 1911, reprint Darmstadt 1974, p. 1: „In a naive view perception represents itself as a process with which we reproduce an existing, ordered and structured reality in our minds”, as an „act of repetition”

<sup>28</sup> Leopold von Ranke: *Englische Geschichte*, vol. 2, 1860, quoted from „Sämtliche Werke”, 2<sup>nd</sup> complete edition, vol. 15, Leipzig 1877, p. 103.

<sup>29</sup> Droysen: *Historik*, p. 405.

these problems. Georg Simmel, Max Weber, Ernst Cassirer and Karl Mannheim moved along these lines. The debate was not only sparked off by the argument with Ranke and his followers but even more so by the probing questions posed by the new empirical natural sciences with regard to the status of historical knowledge and by Nietzsche's rejection of any claim to „objectivity” of historical knowledge.<sup>30</sup> Historical knowledge and its „objectivity” had to be redefined against Ranke and against Nietzsche and also with regard to the challenges posed by empirical natural sciences. What does it mean to speak of the „factuality” of historical knowledge? Which epistemological status does a historical „fact” have? What is „historical reality” as perceived „reality”, i.e. as a „sign of something” (J. G. Droysen)? Does historical „objectivity” exist and how does it rank against the claim of objectivity made by the natural sciences? Those were the questions discussed around 1900. Historical knowledge, again based on Kantian criticism, was defined as knowledge gained empirically and based on the following hypotheses: it is knowledge constituted not by „reproducing” the „past” but by founding it on empirical approaches and problems. It is a „construction” but not an arbitrary one; it is a „cosmos of imagined contexts”, an „imaginary order”, as Max Weber explained it in his treatise on „Objectivity in social science and social policy” dating from 1904.<sup>31</sup> And only thus can it be a „science based on experience”, a „science based on reality”.<sup>32</sup> Knowledge of historical reality cannot be „a reproduction of «objective» facts with no preconditions” but only „the «construction» of contexts which appear to our imagination as sufficiently motivated and also as «objectively possible» [...]”; or, put differently: „It is not the «factual» connections between «things» but the *imagined* connections between *problems* that form the basis of the areas of work of the sciences”<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps it would be worthwhile to reread the key texts of this turn-of-the-century debate before we continue the current debate over „facts and fiction” which seems to be so unproductive: for instance Georg Simmel's „The problems of the philosophy of history” (1892 and 1905), Max Weber's essay on „objectivity” from 1904 or his „Critical studies in the field of logic in the Humanities” from 1906, Ernst Cassirer's book *Substance and Function* from 1910, Max Weber's lecture on „Science as a vocation” from 1917 or Ernst Troeltsch's essay on „The crisis of

<sup>30</sup> Otto Gerhard Oexle: „Naturwissenschaft und Geschichtswissenschaft. Momente einer Problemgeschichte”, in id. (ed.), *Naturwissenschaft, Geisteswissenschaft, Kulturwissenschaft: Einheit – Gegensatz – Komplementarität?*, Göttingen 1998, pp. 99-151.

<sup>31</sup> Max Weber: *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, 5th ed., Tübingen 1982, pp. 142-214, here p. 190 and p. 213.

<sup>32</sup> Op. cit., p. 192 and p. 170.

<sup>33</sup> Op. cit., p. 192 and p. 166.



historicism” from 1922<sup>34</sup> – or the early work by Karl Mannheim on these topics.<sup>35</sup> One could try and see whether, with regard to epistemological questions of historical knowledge, Weber’s theory of an „objective possibility”<sup>36</sup> and Cassirer’s theory of knowledge as a „sign” would not advance us more than the alternative between „facts and fiction”, be it Ranke’s and Nietzsche’s version or today’s.

Max Weber’s argument with the professor of ancient history Eduard Meyer from 1906 or Troeltsch’s crisis-essay published in 1922 would incidentally teach us something about the permanence of „crisis” in modern historiography whose dimensions, as much as they are obviously still present today, were constituted by the beginning of the modern period around 1800 and therefore – in an ever new „crises” of history – still make themselves felt: the problem of the historicity of historical knowledge itself and, following from this, the problem of objectivity in particular but also the question of the social conditioning of scientific knowledge and thus the question of its social relevance and meaning.<sup>37</sup> It was Troeltsch, incidentally, who, in this text as well as in his important book *Historicism and its Problems* (also published in 1922), sharply criticised history as a „business” and the tendencies on which it was based and which continuously fed it. He also showed that because of this „business-like” nature of history and its – admittedly not negligible – successes the historians’ „brotherhood” had not adequately conceived of the fundamental questions pertaining to historical knowledge and history as a discipline, and that as long as they continued to be satisfied with the interminable working of this business they would not be able to conceive of these questions.

## 5.

But let us return to our current debate over facts and fiction. The *facts-versus-fiction* debate is a „trap” because it precludes in advance that a third possibility, at least *one* third possibility exists. The force of the supposed dichotomy between „facts” and „fiction” lies in its apparent inevitability. But at the same time this is also the source of its weakness. Put differently: the dichotomy’s apparent

<sup>34</sup> Otto Gerhard Oexle: „Troeltschs Dilemma”, in Friedrich Wilhelm Graf (ed.): *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* (= Troeltsch-Studien, vol. 11), in press.

<sup>35</sup> Reinhard Laube: „Mannheims «Kategorie der Bürgerlichkeit»: Bürgerlichkeit und Antibürgerlichkeit im Spiegel der Suche nach der «wirklichen» Wirklichkeit”, in Martin Endress – Ilja Sruubar (eds.): *Karl Mannheims Analysen der Moderne: Mannheims erste Frankfurter Vorlesung von 1930. Edition und Studien*, Opladen 2000, pp. 263-291.

<sup>36</sup> Barrelmeyer (as in note 39), p. 159ff., in part. p. 209ff.

<sup>37</sup> Otto Gerhard Oexle: *Geschichtswissenschaft im Zeichen des Historismus*, Göttingen 1996; id.: „Kulturelles Gedächtnis im Zeichen des Historismus”, in Hans-Rudolf Meier – Marion Wohlleben (eds.): *Bauten und Orte als Träger von Erinnerung. Die Erinnerungsdebatte in der Denkmalpflege*, Zurich 2000, p. 59-75.

plausibility is based on the ignorance that a third possibility actually exists. One could also say that the two contradictory, mutually exclusive positions relating to „facts and fiction” are an „epistemological pair” in Gaston Bachelard’s sense: we are dealing with contradictory positions which, in spite of all their differences, agree in one fundamental supposition, which one may or may not accept. In our case both positions claim to know the essence of the „whole” and of the conditions of knowing the „whole” and this is where the problem of both lies. How can one move forward in this discussion? I would like to suggest three conditions for such an advancement.

(1) A first condition for the way ahead lies in the acknowledgement of the *necessity that history itself needs to be historicised*. This historicising of history is fundamental. It is, as Droysen had already explained it in 1857/58, a fundamental prerequisite of modern historical research. „Historical research requires the insight that even the content of our self is a multiply refracted, a historical result”<sup>38</sup> Naturally, this insight also implies *historicising the debates over historical knowledge*. It is not sensible, even from a pragmatic point of view, to discuss problems which were intensively debated a hundred or a hundred and fifty years ago – and possibly in a more productive manner than they are discussed today – merely from a contemporary perspective. Final and „true” answers cannot be found but there are better or worse answers. But it can be debated whether criteria for their quality are based on scientific methods. Of course, it is always attractive to take the floor with a new theory instead of informing oneself about already existing ones whose numbers, incidentally, are not too great. And couldn’t a new theory profit from knowledge of older ones? I don’t have a pious and reverential remembrance of tradition in mind but rather the question whether during the transition period in modern epistemology in all disciplines, namely the period between 1880 and 1932, the fundamental questions of historical knowledge were not reflected in a more comprehensive manner and moreover in a more radical fashion than is the case today.

At least some young sociologists have recently rediscovered the stimulating force of these debates.<sup>39</sup> And it is the sociologists who have recently called for a careful rediscovery of that phase of debates on general principles which took place a century ago. They see the topicality of these debates in the similarities between the structural problems of the modern period around 1900 and those of the

<sup>38</sup> Droysen (as in note 22), p. 399.

<sup>39</sup> Uwe Barrelmeyer: *Geschichtliche Wirklichkeit als Problem. Untersuchungen zu geschichtstheoretischen Begründungen historischen Wissens bei Johann Gustav Droysen, George Simmel und Max Weber*, Münster 1997; Volker Kruse: „Geschichts- und Sozialphilosophie” oder „Wirklichkeitswissenschaft”? *Die deutsche historische Soziologie und die logischen Kategorien René Königs und Max Webers*, Frankfurt 1999.

new millennium of „2000”. They consider historical phase to be the „real heyday” of modernity „under whose spell we still are and which uncovered precisely those problems with which we are still confronted today”<sup>40</sup> To say it again: it is not a reverential reading of this „classic” or the one I have in mind. Rather we should take into account a whole ensemble of „classics” and their definitions and analyses of problems. They were written in a period of crisis and rapid change and that is the reason for their relevance today. „We attribute meaning to the classics because they represent these periods of change and how to cope with them intellectually.”<sup>41</sup> The point is not to return blindly to those opinions but to take up the questions again on which these opinions were based and at least to take the answers which were given to them seriously. If one follows this advice, perhaps many a wheel need not be reinvented.

(2) A second prerequisite for advancement is as follows: the debate over facts and fiction is, as we have seen, an international one. But is it really *one* debate? Do not we have much debate on one topic running parallel to another? In any case it is obvious that the individual positions are determined by the *historically mediated, culturally conditioned traditions of „national” thinking*. It is for instance evident that German historians continue to be fixated with Ranke, irrespective of whether „the rescue of the fact” is called for or whether, by contrast, a defiant fiction-stance is taken up against the tradition of „*Wie es eigentlich gewesen*” and against Ranke’s „metaphysical, objective idealism”<sup>42</sup>

Equally evident is the British empiricist tradition on which Richard Evans’ book is based. Since this tradition is mainly interested in facts one only has to debate whether facts imply an objective truth about the past, in Geoffrey Elton’s sense (*The Practice of History*, 1967), or whether facts are *also* dependent on the historians’ personal opinions and convictions, in Edward Hallett Carr’s sense (*What is History?*, 1961) and therefore history „is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past”<sup>43</sup> Richard Evans’ book, published in 1997, is essentially an extended commentary on the differences between Carr and Elton. Evans argues entirely along Geoffrey Elton’s lines and like him speaks of „things that happen”, of „true facts”, of „real” or „hard history” and conceives of the historian as an artisan who produces „things”<sup>44</sup> I ask myself whether this assurance in an

<sup>40</sup> Klaus Lichtblau: *Georg Simmel*, Frankfurt – New York 1997, p. 14.

<sup>41</sup> Otthein Rammstedt: „Umgang mit Klassikern”, in *Soziologische Revue* 18 (1995), pp. 515-520, p. 520.

<sup>42</sup> Joachim Rückert: *Idealismus, Jurisprudenz und Politik bei Friedrich Carl von Savigny*, Ebelsbach 1984, p. 240.

<sup>43</sup> Evans (as in note 1), p. 1f., p. 75ff. and elsewhere. Quotation from Edward Hallett Carr: *What Is History?*, London 1962, p. 24.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Quentin Skinner: „Sir Geoffrey Elton and the Practice of History”, in *Transactions of*  
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empirical assertion of knowledge of facts and «the» past is not the reason for the vehemence of the postmodern challenge, in particular, of American historians, as well as the equally vehement reaction to it, as represented by Evans.

The „cultural” differences become more evident when one compares Evans’ arguments against the „postmodern challenges” with a like-minded plea by the French historian Roger Chartier.<sup>45</sup> In his book *Au bord de la falaise. L’histoire entre certitudes et inquiétude* (On the Edge of the Cliff. History Between Certainties and Disquiet), published in 1998, Chartier, too, observes a crisis in historical knowledge, „la crise de l’intelligibilité historique”, which is further increased by the loss of trust in what was taken as a matter of course in the most recent phase of history as a discipline; since the certainties of quantifying history, of classic divisions of historical objects and familiar terms like „mentality” and „*culture populaire*” now lie in the past; to which the collapse of classic interpretations like Marxism and structuralism are added. That is why, according to Chartier, history currently finds itself „on the edge of the cliff” or even at the „abyss”, at least „between certainty and disquiet” But Chartier’s approach is not remotely related to a simple belief in the possibility of knowing „facts” or „the past” in Richard Evans’ or Werner Paravicini’s sense. He redefines history’s course between narration and science („entre récit et connaissance”), by defining historical knowledge with Michel de Certeau (*L’écriture de l’histoire*, 1975) as a „construction” and a „composition”, which is determined by the search for truth and which is „scientific” in so far as it is constituted by the „possibilité d’établir un ensemble de règles permettant de «contrôler» des opérations proportionnées à la production d’objets déterminés”<sup>46</sup> And further: „Abandonner cette intention de vérité, peut-être démesurée mais sûrement fondatrice, serait laisser le champ libre à toutes les falsifications, à tous les faussaires qui, parce qu’ils trahissent la connaissance, blessent la mémoire. Aux historiens, en faisant leur métier, d’être vigilants.” But Chartier of course is not part of an empiricist tradition of philosophy. Historical knowledge is for him, as it was for Droysen or Max Weber, neither reproduction of „reality” nor fiction: it is a „*représentation*”<sup>47</sup>

Cultural or „national” influences of this kind are already present in the usage of the term „science” Is history a „science”? In spite of all the differences with regard to the explanations and reasons given (Ranke, Droysen, Dilthey, Max Weber) in the German tradition „history” has always been understood and explained as a science. In Cambridge or in Stanford this would provoke a sceptical

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*the Royal Historical Society. Sixth Series 7* (1997), pp. 301-316.

<sup>45</sup> Roger Chartier: *Au bord de la falaise. L’histoire entre certitudes et inquiétude*, Paris 1998.

<sup>46</sup> Op. cit., p. 104f.; see p. 16.

<sup>47</sup> Op. cit., p. 105 and elsewhere.

smile<sup>48</sup> since here the term „science” is restricted to the natural sciences: physics is a science but „history” is not. What „history” is supposed to be is defined quite differently in different places and this is also a historically mediated fact. The nature of „history” is culturally relative and therefore requires a historical explanation. Perhaps historians should communicate more than is the case about this problem and perhaps they should do so in *comparative* fashion.

(3) And finally a third point. The extent, to which contemporary historians in their topical debates leave aside the *relation between history and the natural sciences*, is surprising. This is a fundamental difference between the current debates and those which were conducted from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards to the end of the 1920s, for instance in Germany,<sup>49</sup> and in particular by Droysen and Max Weber. History and all the disciplines connected with cultural studies should feel an urgent need to negotiate with natural sciences about their status and about the epistemological status of knowledge and its consequences. There are several reasons for this.

Firstly, the current positions in the debate over „facts and fiction” contain hidden suppositions with regard to the natural sciences. An example would be Hayden White,<sup>50</sup> one of the founding fathers and custodians of postmodernism against whom Richard Evans consequently fights hard.<sup>51</sup> Like Evans Hayden White (*Metahistory*, 1973) thinks that historians are confronted with what he calls „events *already constituted*”<sup>52</sup> But in contrast to Evans Hayden White is convinced that historians can in no way adequately grasp this reality. From this follows „the nonscientific or protoscientific nature of historical studies”,<sup>53</sup> a view of historical studies, which itself is based on the comparison, White makes between history and the natural sciences: history today has not achieved the status of scientific explanation that physics had already had in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. According to Hayden White, since the 18<sup>th</sup> century modern historical thought has been unable to find a way „of choosing, on adequate theoretical grounds, among the different ways of viewing history”, „the only grounds for preferring one over another are *moral* or *aesthetic* ones”<sup>54</sup> Hayden White’s well-known literarisation of „history” is thus based on his notion of physics and it is explained in rather scientific fashion. More

<sup>48</sup> Lorraine Daston: „Die Kultur der wissenschaftlichen Objektivität”, in *Naturwissenschaft, Geisteswissenschaft, Kulturwissenschaft* (as in note 30), p. 9-39, p. 11f.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Oexle (as in note 30), p. 111ff.

<sup>50</sup> Otto Gerhard Oexle: „Sehnsucht nach Klio. Hayden Whites «Metahistory» – und wie man darüber hinwegkommt”, in *Rechtshistorisches Journal* 11 (1992), pp. 1-18.

<sup>51</sup> Evans (as in note 1), p. 66, 79ff., 124ff. and elsewhere.

<sup>52</sup> Hayden White: *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore – London 1973, p. 6.

<sup>53</sup> Op. cit., p. 428.

<sup>54</sup> Op. cit., p. 432, p. 433.

than that: it is based on a notion of physical, scientific knowledge as it was prevalent in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This is rather bizarre since the assumption that the opinions of physicists concerning their knowledge and its explanation have not changed since the days of Newton is rather strange. And furthermore didn't physics in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, under the influence of Bohr's principle of complementarity and Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle, turn away from a notion of a „true”, unambiguous, definite knowledge of natural reality? Hayden White does not seem to have noticed this. And: does not the „new physics” of the 1920s in its epistemological premises correspond exactly to the fundamental notions of scientific knowledge as knowledge based on empirically founded hypotheses as for instance Max Weber represented it?<sup>55</sup>

Clarifying one's position with regard to the differences and similarities between historical and scientific knowledge we will therefore clarify and define the assumptions historians hold with regard to historical knowledge.

A political factor also enters the arena since any discussion concerning the status of knowledge will have its consequences for the academic world and beyond. The current debate over „facts and fiction” as it is currently conducted is not very helpful here. The assertion that „true” knowledge of facts and of „the” past is possible will not impress epistemologically informed natural scientists, on the contrary.<sup>56</sup> And the notion that historical knowledge is nothing but poetry and the historian „only a species of the kind «poet/writer»” will please precisely those natural scientists who want to push cultural studies and history into the background or even argue for their abolition.

Historians have a lot to do. But naturally they have to *want* to do it and they must desire to achieve this on the highest possible intellectual level. I think the debate over „facts and fiction” has little to offer in this respect.

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<sup>55</sup> Cf. Oexle: *Naturwissenschaft...* (as in note 30), p. 139ff.

<sup>56</sup> See for example Alfred Gierer: „Naturwissenschaft und Menschenbild”, in *Naturwissenschaft, Geisteswissenschaft, Kulturwissenschaft* (as in note 30), p. 41-60; id.: *Im Spiegel der Natur erkennen wir uns selbst – Wissenschaft und Menschenbild*, Reinbek 1998.