

Cambridge University, there is no single attainable truth about the past, “merely the histories which people construct to empower themselves in the present: black history, women’s history, gay history. Each is ‘true’ according to the perspective from which it is written.” The claim of “objectivity,” insist postmodernists such as Hayden White, is just a device to preserve the “dominance” of the history written by bourgeois white liberal males. Bunk, says Evans.

Certainly, most books in history published in Europe and the United States have been written by white males. But not all of these books have defended the interests of white males and the bourgeois universities that support them, and not a few have explored past oppression and exploitation. Moreover, Evans observes, many women “have written excellent history books about men, just as blacks have written about white slave owners.” And if the postmodernists’ radical subjectivism is correct, only white males can understand white males of the past.

Applying postmodernist ideas to the postmodernists themselves makes obvious the “logical tangle” into which their theories

lead, Evans says. “If all interpretations are equally valid, why should we believe a postmodernist interpretation rather than another one?” he asks.

Postmodernists may not realize it, he adds, but the arguments they make in the interests of “the politics of empowerment and liberation” can have perverse results when applied to the politics of oppression and violence. Can only Bosnian Serbs, for example, write a “true” history of the Bosnian Serbs? Is a Nazi perspective on the Holocaust just as valid as a non-Nazi one?

“If the only grounds we have for preferring one vision of the past to another are aesthetic, moral or political, as some postmodernists maintain, if the persuasiveness of a historical interpretation is simply a matter of the power of its advocates,” writes Evans, “then it does not follow at all that history should necessarily be a democratic, a tolerant or a skeptical enterprise, or that it should in any way favor the politically or culturally disadvantaged.”

Facts do matter, Evans insists. Historians are not free to give the evidence of the past just any meaning whatever. “History,” he says, “is nothing if it is not true.”

PRESS & MEDIA

The Megan Quandary

“Double Punishment?” by Judith Sheppard in *American Journalism Review* (Nov. 1997), 8701 Adelphi Rd., Adelphi, Md. 20783-1716.

New laws that require law enforcement agencies to make public the names and addresses of convicted sex offenders are giving the news media an ethics headache. Forty-five states now have such statutes on the books; Congress adopted a federal “Megan’s Law” in 1996. The problem, writes Sheppard, who teaches journalism at Auburn University, is that while publishing the information may alert residents to potential dangers, it may also encourage vigilantism.

Harassment of sex offenders is apparently the exception rather than the rule. A 1996 study by the Washington State University Institute of Public Policy found only 33 cases of harassment in a state with more than 10,000 registered sex offenders. Yet some of the cases are serious. Neighbors torched the house of one man who was about to return

home from prison. Other sex offenders have lost their jobs. The editor of one California newspaper published a list of sex offenders, only to find the name of her twice-convicted religion editor on it. She fired him.

Some journalists argue that shining a spotlight on sex offenders after they have served time is unfair. Others insist that the news media have a responsibility to expose dangerous people who are, after all, guilty of crimes. If a child molester strikes a second time, asks Philip Seib, a journalism professor at Southern Methodist University, “how do you say, ‘We had this information, and we decided not to alert the community to his presence?’”

The dangers posed by convicted offenders are hard to gauge, Sheppard notes. The oft-cited estimate that 80 to 90 percent of sex

What Makes Journalists Tremble

In remarks originally made at an awards dinner honoring journalists who brave danger to do their work in distant corners of the world, ABC newsman Ted Koppel says in *The Nation* (Nov. 24, 1997) that, in some ways, journalism may be in greater peril here in America.

We celebrate the men and women whose dedication to the collection and distribution of facts threatens their very existence. When they antagonize those with money, political power and guns, they risk their lives. We, on the other hand, tremble at nothing quite so much as the thought of boring our audiences. Antagonizing the rich and powerful is our bread and butter; far from involving any great risk to our safety, it is one of the more reliable paths to professional advancement. The preferred weapons of the rich and powerful here in America are the pollster and the public relations consultant. But they are no threat to the safety of journalists. Our enemies are far more insidious than that. They are declining advertising revenues, the rising cost of newsprint, lower ratings, diversification, and the vertical integration of communications empires.

They are the breezier, chattier styles insinuating themselves onto the front pages of our more distinguished newspapers. They are the fading lines between television news and entertainment. There is, after all, a haunting paradox in the notion that, even as we honor journalists abroad for "risking personal and political peril in upholding the highest standards of their profession," their own stories and the stories they cover are increasingly unlikely to lead any of our broadcasts or appear on any of our front pages. We celebrate their courage even as we exhibit increasingly little of our own.

offenders repeat their crime is apparently not supported by any research. The real figure is probably much lower. And most sex offenses are not committed by strangers; 90 to 95 percent involve incest or acquaintances. "Maybe that's the kind of question a newspaper ought to ask," says Alex MacLeod, managing editor of the *Seattle Times*. "What danger do these people pose? I don't know that we've ever tried to answer that."

Another problem that bothers editors is the accuracy of the official lists. Critics say they

typically have a high rate of error, with many wrong or outdated addresses. Some newspapers now only print the names and addresses on a case-by-case basis.

In the end, the courts may spare the news media further anguish. In New Jersey—the state in which seven-year-old Megan Kanka, for whom Megan's Law was named, was raped and murdered in 1996—the state has frozen the sex offender notification process pending a court challenge to the law. The plaintiffs: 20 convicted child molesters.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

The Myth of Jewish Liberalism

"American Jewish Liberalism: Unraveling the Strands" by Steven M. Cohen and Charles S. Liebman, in *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Fall 1997), Sociology Dept., Univ. of Maryland, College Park, Md. 20742-1315.

American Jews are well known for their liberalism. Some scholars contend that this evolved naturally out of Jewish tradition, with its strong concern for social justice and the welfare of the poor. After analyzing combined data from national surveys conducted between 1972 and 1994, the authors con-

clude that the extent of Jewish liberalism is much exaggerated and Judaic values are not at its root.

The perception that political liberalism is unusually strong among Jews does have a basis in fact, write Cohen, a professor at Hebrew University, in Jerusalem, and Lieb-