Comments on That Noble Dream

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AHR Forum
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We are all in Peter Novick's debt for this book. It is a gift to historians and other scholars, present and future, and the labor and intelligence crystallized in it could not easily be surpassed. Oddly, it is an achievement that we can all take pride in, wherever we stand in relation to Novick's interpretations, for it represents so well the richness of our discipline's contributions. Given what a vast compilation he has created, and what a good storyteller he is, it is all the more astonishing that the book is so thoughtful and insightful. If the book makes many of us begin to dream of other books that should be written—that we might want to write—that is further testimony to its value.

With a view to stimulating substantive discussion, I want to limit my praise for this work—which could be extensive and time-consuming—in order to concentrate on two differences I have with Novick. First, it seems to me that the fundamental question and organization of Novick's approach tend to reify a dichotomy—objectivity/relativism—which only partly characterizes the approaches of historical scholarship over the past century. Second, I believe that his approach privileges an epistemological issue, when his own evidence suggests that the present-day political agendas of historians were often the more fundamental determinants of their apparently theoretical choices. The evidence suggests that historians got excited about the objectivity question when it was mobilized in the service of political conflict.

In general, the method of the book is to look for the abstract theoretical statements of historians (and other scholars who influenced historians) regarding objectivity. Novick's implicit definition of what counts as theory, privileging metahistorical rather than historical statements, has been challenged lately, particularly by scholars from groups traditionally excluded from high learning who may choose different forms of discourse. Novick's book may provide yet another example of the distortions produced by such a definition. It seems likely that abstract theoretical statements tend toward more simplified, pure expressions of positions, and indeed Novick may have sought out the more extreme positions. Many historians—and this includes those whose theoretical views are studied in the book—use more complex, nuanced, even ambivalent and contradictory, assumptions regarding objectivity in their actual historical writing and teaching.

There is room for ambivalence about the very question of whether historians should articulate their epistemological assumptions abstractly. I have regretted the
silence of many historians regarding their claims to truth. At the same time, there are values in historians' lack of self-consciousness about their approaches, because their "naïve" narrative, descriptive, or expository writing more often retains a readability that has been generally lost among other disciplines. In one of the few issues on which I agree with my colleague Ted Hamerow, I lament the increasing specialization and sub-jargons within history writing and cherish the work of those historians who remain dedicated to communicating with a general educated public. Our abilities to tell a good story, to bury interpretation within narrative and other discourse, draw nonspecialists to our work. (Those who are convinced that this public, civic, style has been entirely lost are mistaken because they are uninterested in the areas of history that continue that tradition—labor history, women's history, minority history, yes, even "old-fashioned" political history.) At the same time, we must recognize that this silence about theoretical assumptions makes critique more difficult and nourishes erroneous assumptions about where bias and objectivity are located.

I would argue that the more interesting debates among historians have been between more moderate views regarding objectivity or relativism. Few historians believe that they play no interpretive role; few believe that any interpretation is as good as any other. For example, the prevailing "standpoint" theory is not at all relativist. It argues that individuals are constrained in their insights by their social positions; and that, other things being equal, some social positions produce better views of certain topics than others—for instance, that women, as the subordinated sex, are better positioned to examine gender relations. Many proponents of such a theory would accept that women scholars could be wrong; that male scholars could correct women's mistakes about women's history. Similarly, the notion of "situated knowledge" as it has been developed does not imply that there is an infinity of situations and different interpretations, because it refers not to individual but to large-scale social situations, which can be fairly precisely described and categorized. And most historians would agree—in their actual historical writing if not in their theoretical musing—that, while it may be difficult to label a particular rendition definitive, it may be easy to label various renditions wrong.

In fact, attention to the experience of the craft of historical scholarship itself might suggest why few historians cling to purely objectivist or relativist positions. The work historians must do in order to find texts, which they make into evidence, inclines some to a sense that the sources speak to us. I have experienced research as requiring me to be very quiet when reading documents so that I can "hear" them speak. Thus I interpret the discomfort of many historians with theorizing about their role as having to do with this discipline, so valuable, of silence and of aloneness with pieces of paper (perhaps also pottery shards, etc.). Certainly, this intimacy with sources makes us feel at times like mediums, merely transmitting the past by making ourselves empty. The research experience is also often marked, however, by the fragmentary nature of sources. I assume that many historians, like myself, actually like this very incompleteness, not only because of the excitement of discovery but also because it licenses interpretation.
Novick's focus on philosophizing about history distances us from this sense of the process of history writing and the epistemological sensibility it helps create. Indeed, while objectivity is certainly at issue, I am not at all clear that relativism is the correct formulation of the critique of objectivity. I see rather a continuum between objectivity and interpretation, with many energetic disputes about the nature of interpretation. Poststructuralist thought enables us to see one such dispute: between deconstructionism and what one might call social/historical constructionism. Both deny that meanings are immanent in sources; both direct important attention to changing and contextual meanings of language. Radical deconstructionists find the creation of meaning in the act of reading and theoretically allow an unlimited range of readings/meanings, because of their skepticism about unified subjects, let alone unified social subjects. A more traditional social/historical theory of interpretation sees meanings as flowing from historical cultures surrounding both sources and their interpreters: an interpretation would be wrong if it projected anachronistic interpretations onto historical artifacts/texts; yet we can never safely assume that present-day cultures can be filtered out of our readings of the past. The tension between these two opposite pitfalls defines wonderful intellectual tasks.

Moreover, Novick's choice to use objectivity/relativism as an overarching organization subordinates and thus somewhat oversimplifies the meanings of the tension between structuralist determinism and emphasis on agency (of all kinds—bottom-up resistance, the influence of great individuals, for two examples). While there have been intense criticisms and counter-criticisms among historians regarding their emphases on structure or agency, hegemony or dissidence, social or individual influences, most positions have not been at the extremes.

Deconstructionism may have had a greater impact in my field—women's history—through the hegemony of that method in literature and feminist criticism. It has had a revivifying effect on self-consciousness about our assumptions (although it is surely vulnerable to lack of self-consciousness about its own assumptions). When used well, it tends to raise questions about how questions are posed, one of the most important and difficult techniques of critical thought. It has led to wonderfully subversive critiques of just such binary choices as objectivity/relativism. Yet it has also been used to reify such dichotomies as male/female or black/white. My quarrel with deconstructionist advocates is about their claims for the novelty of what they are doing, not about the value of questioning our access to "reality."

Dichotomizing objectivity and relativism thus minimizes other important tensions, some of which are not binary at all: about relations between social being and scholarly consciousness; between structure and agency; among varieties of history; between finding and constructing meaning, for example.

One of the subordinated tensions in Novick's account is between "Left" and "Right." To be sure, one of the book's contributions is in compiling evidence of how heavily such political orientations have weighed in the profession at times,
and Novick points out that "schools of historical interpretation are never politically neutral." But the evidence is scattered and not schematized. Novick shows that objectivity and relativism never correlated consistently with these political divisions but have cut across them. Still, I think we must question which division has been the more independent variable. It seems to me that, on the whole, the strongest proclamations of objectivity have been made by center, dominant groups and criticized by marginal groups; that Novick's evidence shows this; and that he nevertheless draws back from the implications of this finding.

This is particularly vividly exemplified by contemporary academic politics. As conservative academics organize against affirmative action and for their canon of what is central to history teaching and writing, they claim objectivity. They defend that claim by a reductio ad absurdum of a relativist position and accuse their opponents of fashionableness, thus avoiding substantive discussion of what is important and should be taught in history. In fact, supporters of affirmative action and critics of the "western" civ. canon are not usually relativists but critics of the conservatives' claimed objectivity. The contending epistemological position is more complex and nuanced than relativism, but Novick does not examine it. Novick's approach more obscures than illuminates the actual theoretical positions of those who, for example, think that African-American history is part of U.S. history, that conditions in the "Third World" are part of the history of Europe, that the construction of gender and family are fundamental to modern politics and economies. These may actually be objectivist, not relativist views; by using "relativist," the pejorative term of the objectivists, to describe their opponents, Novick avoids discussing what the nonobjectivists do think.

The influence of politics is obscured by Novick's objectivity/relativism formulation, his concentration on positions at the extremes, and his focus on abstract rather than applied theories. By their nature, most critiques of previous historical scholarship are at least somewhat objectivist in labeling earlier versions wrong, not just different. And most critiques have attempted to explain the error of earlier work in terms of the social sources of that earlier interpretation, making the critiques also somewhat relativist. Furthermore, most critiques are influenced not only by societal politics but by intra-professional power struggles as well.

The influence of politics may also be obscured by Novick's definition of what is "Left" and what is "Right." In general, we might identify two types of definitions of the Left: a more traditional one, on which Novick usually relies, referring to Marxist or other anticapitalist views; and a newer, broader one, referring to all openings toward greater democracy and thus toward the inclusion and representation of marginalized social groups and toward the "new social movements." But even when there is no clear Left/Right definition, one must still see "politics," by which I mean the organized struggle of different social groups for power, including the struggle on the part of those who already have power to keep it.

Novick's definition becomes particularly unsatisfactory when dealing with the last few decades. By considering women's and minority history under the category "particularist" consciousness—which is not the same as relativism—he avoids the

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challenge of this work. In fact, critiques and defenses of particularism go on
within these fields. And precisely the point of Nell Painter’s “Who Decides What
Is History?” was to change the definition of the whole field. Women’s and
minority historians have been concerned with the fundamental definitions of
what counts as history, not only in history. Their critiques not only consider the
exclusions of women and minorities but ask for reconsideration of how the most
important themes of U.S. history are conceptualized, such as religion, republi-
canism, citizenship, political party construction, the frontier, for example.

Indeed, I cannot avoid noting that Novick’s treatment of women’s history is so
scandalously misinformed that it becomes disrespectful. Feminist scholars are
treated quite differently from scholars of any other political persuasion: not
primarily as scholars or intellectuals at all but as political activists. Of the nineteen
pages devoted to women’s history, no more than three discuss the historical or
theoretical work of women’s historians. The rest is about a much-publicized
political conflict—the Sears case—and the politics of women’s studies programs.
(Perhaps I should point out that almost all women’s historians work in history
departments, not in women’s studies programs.) Novick misses not only the rich
theoretical debates within women’s history—about structure and agency, about
the possibility of postulating any cross-class and cross-race shared interests among
women, about the meaning of public and private, for example—but he also misses
the academic politics.

Indeed, from feminist theory has come a critique of claims of objectivity of a
specifically political nature: viewing objectivity as a claim created by a male stream
of thought. This has been argued in various theoretical frameworks (object
relational, Lacanian, deconstructionist). I am skeptical of this phenomenology,
because I am skeptical about all claims of consistent and thoroughgoing sex
difference. Nevertheless, the gender system that creates in women greater
sensitivities to relationship may be expected to have some influence on scholarly
relations to historical subjects.

Ultimately, I would suggest that the crucial question for historians is how the
debate over objectivity affected actual history writing. I am suggesting, of course,
another book—I admit it—and would hardly expect Novick to take on another
such massive task. But I would point out that this critical question cannot be
answered without looking at the possibility that these metahistorical theoretical
claims were wielded primarily as weapons in the politics that history writing
usually contains.