Objectivity and Historicism: A Century of American Historical Writing

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Review Article
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A Century of American Historical Writing

JAMES T. KLOPPENBERG


Reason itself is historical. That insight, which theorists from a wide range of disciplines have come to share in the last two decades, should be welcomed by professional historians as the good news of postmodernism. Instead, many historians have greeted with distrust or disdain the conception of rationality as dialogical and progressive. When radical historicism threatens to topple reason itself from its transhistorical perch, many working historians rush to the rescue. They understand that the commonsensical notion of objectivity inspiring their work is under attack. So, as scholars from various disciplines hasten to repudiate earlier efforts to discover Timeless Truths and Universal Laws, and work diligently to adjust their own vision to include the ceaseless flow of ideas through time, many professional historians retreat to a fortress of unexamined assumptions concerning the nature of the knowledge they can provide.¹ As Peter Novick demonstrates, these issues have been raised before. The problems of objectivity and interpretation have been present as long as history has been written; the solutions now being offered can be traced to the first crisis of historicism in the late nineteenth century.

When the American Historical Association celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 1934, Theodore Clarke Smith surveyed the work of the profession. His fellow historians, he proclaimed, had demonstrated since 1884 their steadfast allegiance to “the ideal of the effort for objective truth.” A year later, Charles A. Beard reaffirmed the very different version of history he had outlined in his 1933 presidential address to the AHA and responded to Smith that the “noble

dream" of scientific objectivity was but an illusion. Writing history, Beard insisted, is "an act of faith." Despite all efforts to know the past, the historian "remains human, a creature of time, place, circumstance, interests, predilections, culture," characteristics that shape historical work and are inevitably reflected in it.²

Fifty years after that exchange, Arthur S. Link benignly assessed the progress of the AHA during its first century in his presidential address. Link congratulated the profession for "the range and diversity" of its work and applauded its ever-broadening membership and horizons of scholarly concern. A year later, AHA President William H. McNeill struck a rather different chord. He dismissed "historiography that aspires to get closer and closer to the documents—all the documents and nothing but the documents," because such work "is merely moving closer and closer to incoherence, chaos, and meaninglessness." He called for historians to confront their limitations and acknowledge that they produce not "eternal and universal Truth," but "mythistory." While McNeill expressed his belief that such "ever-evolving mythhistories will indeed become truer and more adequate to public life," that hope, he conceded, echoing Beard, was "an act of faith."³

Responses to Peter Novick's important study of the objectivity question and the American historical profession will vary widely. Historians drawn to Smith's and Link's positions on historical truth and the social history of the AHA will find their ideas challenged; those persuaded by Beard and McNeill will find much evidence confirming their views. But partisans and critics of the idea of historical objectivity, as well as defenders and prosecutors of the profession itself, should read Novick's book. It contains a wealth of information about the shifting fortunes of historical truth and the changing role of historians in American culture.

Using the published and unpublished writings of hundreds of historians, Novick provides a detailed chronicle of the American historical profession as it has passed through four phases. This framework, whose artificiality Novick readily admits, provides a heuristic device that brings some degree of order to the diverse and unwieldy materials he discusses. First, from 1880 to 1917, objectivity was enthroned as "the central norm of the profession." The struggle evident in some professionalizing social sciences between advocacy and objectivity did not develop among historians, Novick claims, because historians in this early phase took for granted their commitment to disinterested inquiry. The first generation of professional historians rewrote much of the nation's history to suit its white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant assumptions. Slavery became an understandable accommodation with difficult circumstances, the American Revolution a result of the colonists' impatience and ingratitude, and Reconstruction a tragedy

of excessive reformist zeal. As Novick points out, all these judgments—racial, cultural, and political—came wrapped in a cloak of "science" that shielded them from partisan criticism. A consensus of "conservative evolutionism" effectively muffled the voices of "a most genteel insurgency" daring to raise questions about that presumption of objectivity.4

In the second phase of Novick's account, the "changed cultural, social, and political climate" of the interwar years permitted relativism to flourish, however briefly. Critics such as Beard and Carl Becker challenged the orthodoxy of objectivism, and modernist ideas at last filtered slowly into the historical community. New intellectual currents, however, could not prevent the profession from stagnating during these years. Books were often published in the 1930s only if authors (or their friends) could afford to subsidize them. Jews, Catholics, atheists, and agnostics were formally or informally barred from universities. Historians who were employed saw their salaries and status sink. Private control of many faculty appointments and organized assaults on "subversive doctrines" enforced political conformity. Professional historians lost control of the social studies curriculum in secondary schools to the new educational establishment. They lost their lay audience to gifted amateurs who wrote popular histories. The bleakness of most historians' situations was matched only by the barrenness of the work they produced. Perhaps mercifully, "incestuous back-scratching and mutual admiration," in David Potter's words, "chloroformed the review sections of American historical journals" during these years. Novick limits his discussion of historiographical disputes to the controversies swirling around German war guilt and the coming of the American Civil War, both of which seemed increasingly to turn on questions of personal commitment rather than scientific verification. In a glum summary of the interwar period, Novick writes, "declining confidence in professionalism helped call its associated doctrine [of objectivity] into question."5

The coming of World War II reversed the profession's decline and bolstered historians' faith in their ability to disclose truth. Relativism in all fields came under attack, as scholars denounced cultural anthropology, legal realism, pragmatism, and the sociology of knowledge for making possible the nihilism that bred totalitarianism. Historians assailed Becker and especially Beard, because of his isolationism even more than his relativism. The doubts of the interwar years vanished in the resolute affirmation of Americanism that sustained the nation through the ordeal of the war and into its triumphant and then traumatic aftermath. As Novick indicates, both conservatives invoking absolute truth and liberals trumpeting their nonpartisanship challenged the wide range of ideas that had eroded faith in the ideal of objectivity. During the late 1940s and 1950s, historians confidently constructed a "new, somewhat chastened, objectivist synthesis, trivializing the relativist critique by partially incorporating

it." During these years, the number of professional historians rose, anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism fell, and the quality and quantity of published work improved. With many of its prominent members having served proudly in the Office of Strategic Services during the war, Novick points out, the AHA quickly and easily adopted the new realism of the cold war years. American diplomatic history became the story of America’s rise to power. General history courses became the story of Atlantic civilization’s rise to dominate the uncivilized non-Western world. Throughout the scholarly community, efforts proceeded simultaneously to mobilize the West “for world-wide ideological struggle, while parading disinterested objectivity as one of the West’s distinctive values and institutions.”

The 1960s saw the weakening of this conviction. “The political culture lurched sharply left, then right; consensus was replaced first by polarization, then by fragmentation; affirmation, by negativity, confusion, apathy, and uncertainty.” This chaos has persisted into the present, and Novick makes no attempt to impose order on it. He recounts the emergence of New Left, black, ethnic, and feminist scholarship, the rise of the field of public history, and the proliferation of narrow sub-specialties with their own conferences, journals, and jargons. He describes the shrinking job market, the dwindling purchasing power of professors’ salaries, the eroding authority of the professoriat vis à vis university administrators, and the increasing marginalization of history in the schools. He cynically dismisses the papers presented at the annual meetings of the AHA as pointless rituals, mere distractions from the real purpose of such conferences: job hunting. Finally, he argues that specialization has advanced to the point that calls by the editors of the American Historical Review for submissions of general interest are meaningless, since “there no longer [are] any topics of general interest.” The breadth of the appeal of Novick’s book itself, however, decisively refutes that claim.

Novick’s detailed chronicle of the American historical profession constitutes an important contribution that will be of interest to all historians, but on several different levels. As C. Vann Woodward has noted, older historians will be intrigued (or distressed) to see their teachers, then their peers, then their younger colleagues, and finally their students emerge as principal players in the drama Novick recounts. Younger historians may find the book a reprise of their comprehensive examinations, played on fast forward. The book is a gold mine of inside stories, revealing the private thoughts of many prominent and not-so-prominent historians, and for that reason it will have—as it deserves—a wide audience. It may also inhibit historians from committing their private thoughts to paper in the future. The publication of Novick’s book, together with the easy, confidential access to others that long-distance telephone calls provide, may make it impossible to write the sequel to this volume fifty years from now.

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6 Novick, That Noble Dream, 16, 314.
7 Novick, That Noble Dream, 415, 580.
If the principal strength of Novick's study is its social history of the American historical profession, its principal weakness is the intellectual history of the objectivity question that it does not provide. Those familiar with the existing secondary literature on the American historical profession may wonder why Novick ignores studies such as Gene Wise's *American Historical Explanations* and David Hackett Fischer's *Historians' Fallacies*, which cover much of the same ground. Moreover, although Novick does refer to studies such as Thomas L. Haskell's *Emergence of Professional Social Science* and John Higham's *History*, he does not advance our understanding of the substantive issues concerning the question of objectivity itself. To be fair, Novick explicitly renounces the attempt to provide systematic analysis of that sort. He notes in his introduction that the idea of historical objectivity rests on philosophical ideas he considers "dubious" and that important aspects of the idea seem to him "psychologically and sociologically naive." He explains "the reason why I cannot take a position for or against objectivity is my historicism, which here means simply that my way of thinking about anything in the past is primarily shaped by my understanding of its role within a particular historical context, and in the stream of history." He announces that his "own deepest methodological commitment is to the 'overdetermination' of all activity, including thought," but beyond that he refuses to go. To elaborate further would involve defending his position "with arguments," which he chooses not to do "since this isn't that sort of book." This is, however, that sort of essay, and readers should be forewarned that I do intend to defend with arguments, albeit in shorthand form, a version of historicism unlike the one that Novick espouses, a pragmatic hermeneutics that provides an alternative to the gloom that descends over the concluding chapter of *That Noble Dream*. Novick's panorama of the profession is impressive, and it provides exactly the comprehensive overview of the shaping of the professoriat that he set out to provide. It would be unfair to fault him for failing to write a book altogether different from the one he chose to write. He has produced a solid, useful social history of an important topic, and this essay should not be understood as a denial of that considerable achievement. I want only to explore another dimension of the objectivity question, particularly because I intend to offer a rather different perspective from Novick's on the problems and prospects facing contemporary historians who confront these issues.

The historicism Novick espouses has a history itself, a history roughly parallel to the history he offers in *That Noble Dream*. Some thinkers who have ventured

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critiques of objectivity have developed ideas considerably more elaborate than the rough-and-ready commitment to the overdetermination of thought Novick offers. Near the end of his introduction, he notes, almost apologetically, that "inevitably, I spend a good deal of time talking about what historians do worst, or at least badly: reflecting on epistemology. This loads the dice against historians: something like a sportswriter reporting on their performance in the annual history department softball game." By providing the account he does, however, Novick also loads the dice against those historians who have played more than a little softball in their day. All readers of the book will derive from it rich anecdotes about the follies, misconceptions, and pettiness of notable historians who just could not play epistemology very well. Unfortunately, by refusing to examine in detail the more sophisticated versions of historicism that provide attractive alternatives to objectivism, Novick ironically may perpetuate the very hyper-realism he distrusts. He devotes considerably more attention to the archival "finds" that objectivists prize than to the interpretation of difficult ideas that historicists have tried to develop. Novick's study demonstrates, in short, that a long and multidimensional portrait can appear to be an objective chronicle of "what actually happened" to the American historical profession, even though it seems clear from his introduction that Novick sought to do something quite different. Novick's periodization, though useful for his social history of historians, contributes to this problem by blurring the edges of the ideas advanced by thinkers who were out of phase with the historical profession, thinkers whose insights undermined the idea of objectivity even though they did not succeed in converting the majority of working historians to their point of view.

Novick's account of the relation between the idea of objectivity and a vague alternative of relativism seems to me inadequate. The philosopher Richard J. Bernstein has distinguished between two approaches to knowledge, what he terms the "grand and seductive Either/Or," on the one hand, and efforts to move "beyond objectivism and relativism," on the other. Bernstein's brilliant analysis concerns recent philosophical work, particularly the ideas of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas, Richard Rorty, and Hannah Arendt. He realizes, though, that his argument can be extended back to the early twentieth-century ideas of William James, John Dewey, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Wilhelm Dilthey.

the symbiotic relationship between contextualist and (Dilthey if not Gadamerian) hermeneutic approaches to historical study, see esp. 613–14. For a more detailed account of the varieties of hermeneutics, and an explanation of the reasons why historians might still find Dilthey's version useful, see the splendid essay by Michael Ermanrath, "The Transformation of Hermeneutics: 19th-Century Ancients and 20th-Century Moderns," The Monist, 61 (April 1981): 176–94. Dilthey took not only texts but all of experience as the appropriate field of hermeneutical inquiry. His method was not limited to the boundaries of linguistic expression that provide the horizon for so much contemporary scholarship. As Kurt Mueller-Vollmer has written in the introduction to his comprehensive overview of this tradition, since the eighteenth century, The Hermeneutics Reader (Oxford, 1986), 27, Dilthey believed that "the human sciences had as their object the interpretation of all phenomena, nonverbal as well as verbal." For reasons I hope to make clear, that approach has more in common with Deweyan pragmatism than with Derridean deconstruction; it may also prove more useful for historians.

11 Novick, That Noble Dream, 15.
all of whom likewise sought to move beyond the dichotomies that constrain Novick's analysis. Novick begins his book by briefly listing the cluster of ideas that compose the concept of historical objectivity: "a commitment to the reality of the past, and to truth as correspondence to that reality; a sharp separation between knower and known, between fact and value, and above all, between history and fiction. Historical facts are seen as prior to and independent of interpretation... Truth is one, not perspectival. Whatever patterns exist in history are 'found,' not 'made.'" This conception of binary oppositions between subject and object or fact and interpretation can be traced back to what Bernstein calls the "Cartesian anxiety" at the root of modern Western thought: "Either there is some support for our being, a fixed foundation for our knowledge, or we cannot escape the forces of darkness that envelop us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos." These pervasive dualisms haunted seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth-century thinkers who believed that, without an epistemological Archimedean point, all knowledge would be lost to the anarchy of competing opinions. As Richard Rorty has argued persuasively in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, such dichotomies threw Western philosophy off course for several centuries.12

In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, however, a number of European and American philosophers tried to escape those dichotomies by reconceiving the relations between mind and body, subject and object, fact and value, and knowledge and action. Having already written a long study of these ideas, I will offer only a short summary here. These thinkers advanced a radical theory of knowledge that broke down inherited dualisms and replaced them with a conception of immediate experience as the intersection of subject and object, a pragmatic theory of truth that substituted continuing social experimentation for certainty, and a historical sensibility that conceived of all knowledge—in the natural as well as the social sciences—as intrinsically meaningful and rooted in cultural processes that can be known only through interpretation. Their perspective, in short, was phenomenological, pragmatic, and hermeneutic, and it contrasted in every dimension with the binary opposition between objectivism and relativism that is fundamental to Novick's study.13

If Bernstein and Rorty are right about the contemporary scene, the voyage "beyond objectivism and relativism" will soon be standard for historians as well as philosophers, political and social theorists, and perhaps even a few stray literary critics. Dissatisfaction with objectivity need not culminate in relativism or in skepticism. There is an alternative, which John Dewey described in a lecture on William James that he delivered in 1920:

James has consistently opposed absolute dogmatism in philosophy, and at the same time he has repudiated utter skepticism. Even though he recognized that no truth can be


discovered unless there is an inclination to doubt, he eschews absolute skepticism because it is not constructive. Skepticism, according to James, can be justified only when it advances an alternative hypothesis; and if the skeptic's hypothesis is verified, we must accept it in lieu of the earlier one which gave rise to the skeptic's doubts. What is most distasteful to James is a skepticism which brings with it nothing that can contribute constructively to investigation. He advises us to doubt, but he warns us against an attitude of complete skepticism. He asks us to look for new truth in the results of our past experiments at the same time that we continue to experiment and to seek for a growing area of practical belief.  

As James understood and Dewey reaffirmed, there is in pragmatic theory a fruitful alternative to relativism. Hypotheses—such as historical interpretations—can be checked against all the available evidence and subjected to the most rigorous critical tests the community of historians can devise. If they are verified provisionally, they stand. If they are disproved, new interpretations must be advanced and subjected to similar testing. The process is imperfect but not random; the results are always tentative but not worthless. It is this strand of pragmatic hermeneutics, which has been present in the best work of American historians since the first decade of the twentieth century, that Novick tends to overlook. When all historians are categorized as either objectivists or relativists, this intermediate position may either disappear from view or seem a tepid compromise. I want to examine briefly several of the historians Novick discusses in That Noble Dream, suggesting in each case why his version of the "Either/Or" leads him to misconstrue their conception of historical truth.

Novick characterizes James Harvey Robinson as a "moderate skeptic" on the objectivity question, but he contends that a "significant qualification" makes it appropriate to distinguish Robinson's writing prior to 1917 from relativism. History, Robinson wrote, "should not be regarded as a stationary subject which can only progress by refining its methods and accumulating, criticizing, and assimilating new material." The relativity of historical knowledge "is conditioned by our constant increase in knowledge... To what may be called the innate relativity of things... we have added a dynamic relativity which is the result of rapidly advancing scientific knowledge, which necessarily renders all our conclusions provisional." This passage seems clearly to reflect the influence of James, whose powerful and lasting effect on Robinson Novick notes and Robinson himself acknowledged, and of Dewey, with whom Robinson frequently met after Dewey moved to Columbia University in 1910, as Novick also mentions. Because Robinson expressed "confidence in progress," however, Novick judges his and other such optimism "a powerful limitation on the critique of historical objectivity." Yet, as Dewey's 1920 assessment of James correctly indicates, pragmatists insisted on the "constructive" dimension of inquiry. James

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and Dewey both denied that pragmatism must culminate in skepticism; they endorsed it precisely because it seemed to them likely to disclose provisional but useful knowledge that could make possible further progress. From the earliest stages of “the new history,” then, when Robinson, Beard, and Becker were beginning to challenge historical objectivity by infusing their historical writing with Jamesian ideas of truth, the possibility of a pragmatic hermeneutics was under consideration by American historians. This modification does not quite fit Novick’s conception of a pre-war objectivist consensus, but it seems to me nevertheless a necessary refinement of his scheme.

Novick’s account of the challenges to objectivity in the 1930s is among the strongest sections of That Noble Dream. He discusses briefly and deftly the various intellectual currents that bolstered Beard’s and Becker’s confidence in their anti-objectivist critiques. From the pragmatism of James and Dewey and the new science of Albert Einstein, Niels Bohr, and Werner Heisenberg to the cultural anthropology of Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead, the anthropological linguistics of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, and the legal realism of Karl N. Llewellyn, Jerome Frank, and Thurman W. Arnold, Novick outlines the ideas that unsettled interwar claims to objective truth. He traces the influence of Wilhelm Dilthey, Benedetto Croce, and Karl Mannheim on American thinking. He examines Beard’s and Becker’s influential interwar writings thoroughly and incisively. Moreover, when discussing the criticism they received from historians such as Theodore Clarke Smith and philosophers such as Maurice Mandelbaum, Arthur O. Lovejoy, and Felix S. Cohen, Novick emphasizes a distinction similar to that Dewey drew between skepticism and James’s pragmatism. Becker and Beard “did not deny the existence or knowability of truth,” Novick concedes. “Rather than saying that there was no criterion for what is true, they stressed the variety of criteria employed by different societies, epochs, and methodological assumptions.” They denied only “the existence of a timeless and universally valid metacriterion for deciding between them. The distinction between skepticism and relativism, real and important to Becker, Beard, and those in their camp, seemed unreal and inconsequential to absolutists for whom ‘truth,’ to be worthy of the name, had to be singular and immutable.”16

Important as that distinction between relativism and absolutism might seem to Novick, it may be somewhat misleading. Neither Beard nor Becker considered himself a “relativist” in the sense in which Novick seems to use the term. Instead, they were historicists—and pragmatists—through and through. Beard branded relativism a species of “absolutism” and countered it with “the absolute totality of all historical occurrences past, present, and becoming to the end of all things.” Given the unfinished quality of experience, given what James called its open-endedness, relativism—like all other doctrines—must withstand the unending test of verification in practice. In Beard’s words, even though history can never be a science because it will never have predictive power, historians will continue to rely on the scientific method to frame and test their hypotheses, because “the

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16 Novick, That Noble Dream, 283.
inquiring spirit of science, using the scientific method, is the chief safeguard against the tyranny of authority." For Becker, getting the facts right will always remain a historian's duty, while the idea of a science of history will always remain an illusion. "Regarded historically, as a process of becoming," Becker wrote, echoing James, "man and his world can obviously be understood only tentatively, since it is by definition something still in the making, something as yet unfinished." History as Beard and Becker understood it was not so much relativism as it was a form of hermeneutics and pragmatic truth-testing, in which knowledge derives from weaving together fact and interpretation to create stories—myths, Becker called them—whose accuracy must therefore always be considered provisional.17

Such ideas attracted considerable support during the 1930s, but the coming of the Good War changed everything. Becker and especially Beard were buried under a torrent of abuse from prominent historians such as Allan Nevins, J. H. Hexter, Thomas A. Bailey, and Samuel Eliot Morison. But, as Novick argues, it was perhaps less their historicism than Beard's isolationism and his criticism of the sainted Franklin D. Roosevelt that accounted for the postwar outpouring of ill will. The consequences of relativism were pernicious, Beard's critics charged. If the critique of objectivism led to follies such as pacifism in the face of Fascism and Nazism, then objectivism must be preferable to the alternatives. Equally sloppy logic undergirded most self-righteous affirmations of Americanism as well as objectivism, and in the wake of several rather less good wars it requires an act of historical imagination to recapture the cultural self-confidence that fueled historical writing in the 1950s.18

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the objectivist doctrine simply returned to its Rankean shape after having been stretched and rumbled by critics from a variety of disciplines. Even Morison, the admiral-historian of impeccable credentials in both hot and cold wars, took the occasion of his AHA presidential address in 1950 not only to pay his disrespects to Beard, as Novick notes, but also to distance himself from the notion of scientific history. "It goes without saying," Morison made a point of saying, "that complete, 'scientific' objectivity is unattainable by the historian . . . No historian of my generation has ever pretended otherwise." While such concessions elicit Novick's judgment that postwar historians trivialized the relativist critique by partially incorporating it, many of them did more than that. Morison, for example, cited approvingly not only Leopold von Ranke but Croce, and he acknowledged that it is the historian who "decides what is significant, and what is not . . . because he is writing of the

past but not for the past; he is writing for the public of today and tomorrow." 19 Morison distanced himself from "relativism," to be sure, but so did Beard, despite the charges of his critics. Historians had as much reason to be proud, and to be chastened, as did other Americans in the 1940s and 1950s, and the stridency of their nationalism is understandable in that context. Incorporating critiques of objectivism, however, does not necessarily involve trivializing them. Sophisticated versions of historicism do not require historians to renounce their own values but only to confront them openly, as Morison and other cold warriors occasionally did. Beard and Morison were equally forthright partisans politically, although they often took different sides. As historians, they occupied the same scarred and contested terrain somewhere between—or perhaps even beyond—objectivism and relativism. When Morison criticized some of the more egregious errors in Beard’s historical writing, he was just as clearly on target as Beard was in criticizing the excessive objectivism of ostensibly scientific historians.

American historians in the postwar years shared the national consensus on the desirability of democracy and the identification of American culture as it was with their democratic ideal. Novick’s evidence indicates that their consensus did not extend to the objectivity question. He recounts the diversity of opinion that greeted drafts of Bulletin 54 of the Social Science Research Council, Theory and Practice in Historical Study: A Report of the Committee on Historiography, which were circulated in the late 1940s. This compilation of essays and propositions, inspired by Beard and directed by Merle Curti, staked out a position somewhere between objectivism and relativism. On the one hand, writing history requires “a selection of so-called facts made by some man or woman . . . under the influence of some scheme of reference, interest, or emphasis.” On the other hand, the historian “must confine himself to the making of verifiable statements about history-as-actuality.” Although both statements seem to me fully consistent with the historicist conception of pragmatic hermeneutics, to Novick the imperative for historians to confine themselves to the verifiable “seemed to contradict and undercut” the “clearly relativist . . . principal thrust” of the document. If the document itself indicates that “official” proclamations on the question of historical method were hardly objectivist, the responses the report elicited when it was published in 1945 demonstrate just as clearly the wide range of views practicing historians held, from the enthusiastic endorsement by C. Crane Brinton to the equally predictable dismissive criticism by Oscar Handlin. 20

The distance separating historians from objectivist currents of thought is likewise apparent in their responses to the efforts of philosophers, political theorists, and social scientists during these years to construct positive laws governing human conduct. Whereas linguistic analysis, conceptual clarification, and varieties of behaviorism and functionalism gained ground steadily in other


20 The quotations are taken from Novick’s discussion of Bulletin 54 in That Noble Dream, 387–92.
disciplines after World War II, historians generally viewed such efforts as futile. When Carl Hempel applied Karl Popper's concept of a "covering law" to history, and when Mandelbaum elaborated his own objectivist theory, few historians were persuaded. Even prominent philosophers, including Morton White, Arthur Danto, and William Dray, supported historians' efforts to defend themselves from the misconceived advances of postwar philosophy and social science.\textsuperscript{21}

While there were some historians intoxicated by the idea of becoming scientists, and others, such as Hexter, who found equally irresistible the impulse to escape presentism by flinging themselves wholly into the past, many of the best American historians tried to strike a balance between their responsibility to the facts of the past and their responsibility to the issues of the present. Novick contends that, by the early 1960s, there were "signs of restlessness with what some saw as the excessively antiseptic character which an overreaction to the perceived partisan excesses of a previous generation had brought to historiography." He offers as evidence John Higham's essay "Beyond Consensus: The Historian as Moral Critic," (1962), which Novick suggests presented a model of "historiography as moral connoisseurship." But Higham explicitly called for social and political criticism of the sort Novick finds lacking among historians; Higham wanted historians not to ignore such analysis but to move beyond it by becoming more self-conscious of their commitments and refusing to apply static and simplistic political formulas to the study of the past. His position, like those of Robinson, Beard, and Becker before him, was pragmatic rather than straightforwardly objectivist or relativist—even though he criticized pragmatists (somewhat unfairly, at least in the case of James and his followers) for concentrating too heavily on social engineering and ignoring the felt experience and intentions of others. In Higham's words, "the obligation of the historian to become a moral critic grows out of the breakdown of ethical absolutes. If no single ethical system, even a pragmatic one that trusts the piecemeal results of history, does justice to all situations, a complex awareness must take the place of systematic theory." That complex awareness was the hallmark of the most gifted historians of the immediate postwar years, historians whose work cannot fairly be said to reflect what Novick calls "a deep and widespread conviction that the profession was moving steadily in the direction of establishing objective historical truth."\textsuperscript{22}

Neither Curti nor Higham—nor even Morison—endorsed the doctrine of

\textsuperscript{21} For this controversy, see the essays collected in Philosophy and History: A Symposium, ed. Sidney Hook (New York, 1963); for Novick's perceptive discussion, see That Noble Dream, 392–95. Recent contributions to this debate may be found in History and Theory, Belknap 25: Knowing and Telling History: The Anglo-Saxon Debate (1986). On the rise and fall of postwarism in philosophy and social science, compare David Miller, "Linguistic Philosophy and Political Theory," in David Miller and Larry Siedentop, eds., The Nature of Political Theory (Oxford, 1983); Jeffrey Stout, Ethics after Babel (Boston, 1988); and especially Richard J. Bernstein, The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory (New York, 1976).

historical objectivity or even adopted what Novick terms a strategy of "rejection by partial incorporation." Further examples could be added from Novick's discussion of the historiography on slavery and the Civil War, which he tries unsuccessfully to fit into his periodization as evidence of the prevailing consensus surrounding the desirability of objectivity. New values played at least as large a part in the new interpretations of these issues as did new information. As Novick admits, Howard K. Beale, Kenneth Stampp, and David Potter all acknowledged that historians' judgments on these highly charged questions inevitably reflect their personal convictions and their own historical contexts. Yet, as Potter argued, that awareness differed from simple-minded relativism, because steadily accumulating factual material "narrows the alternatives between which controversy continues to rage." Not surprisingly, Richard Hofstadter most eloquently expressed the position of many in his generation in the conclusion to his study of Frederick Jackson Turner, Charles Beard, and Vernon L. Parrington, *The Progressive Historians* (1968). To his credit, Novick quotes much of this passage, even though it contradicts his argument concerning the appeal of objectivity for historians in the postwar period:

[As] one looks at the productive historiographical arguments of the past two decades, one cannot fail to see that historians are responding in their own way to the sense of crisis that is so pervasive in our time. Here the issue is an old one: they are troubled about their own role and function, caught between their desire to count in the world and their desire to understand it.... The great fear that animates the most feverishly committed historians is that our continual rediscovery of the complexity of social interests... may give us not only a keener sense of the structural complexity of our society in the past, but also a sense of the moral complexity of social action that will lead to political immobility. Since a keen sense of history begets a feeling of social responsibility and a need to act, this is not necessarily the case; but history does seem inconsistent with the coarser rallying cries of politics. Hence I suppose we may expect that the very idea of complexity will itself come under fire once again, and that it will become important for a whole generation to argue that most things in life and in history are not complex but really quite simple. This demand I do not think the study of history can gratify.

Hofstadter was right about much of what passed for radical history in the 1960s and 1970s. As Novick demonstrates, many "New Left" historians, to use a label that obscures as much as it clarifies, were anything but radical in their sometimes unself-conscious and sometimes defiant commitment to a naive objectivist epistemology. Other scholars committed to ethnic, feminist, or public history either implicitly or explicitly challenged the ideal of objectivism by denying that any "universal" vantage point exists for writing history. Some of these historians adopted the perspectivalism about truth that seems necessarily to accompany such claims. Others, Novick remarks, presumed to write "objective" histories from explicitly privileged positions because of their race, ethnicity, gender, or other characteristics. As Novick implies, such historians'


minds were clearly too broad to be troubled by the hobgoblin of logical consistency.

Novick shifts his ground quickly when he turns his attention to the rise of public history. He dismisses as "opportunistic relativism" the forthright claims by some historians that their admitted advocacy need not compromise their scholarly integrity. In a book dedicated to demonstrating the futility of efforts to escape the historicity of historical writing, that criticism seems jarring. Novick's treatment of one of the most controversial cases of this decade, the battle over Rosalind Rosenberg's and Alice Kessler-Harris's testimony in the case of Equal Employment Opportunity Commission vs. Sears, Roebuck & Co., is equally puzzling. After having repeatedly chided historians for their timidity in hiding behind the claim of scholarly detachment for most of the twentieth century, Novick concludes, "Of all the illusions in which we seek refuge, none is more pathetic than that which holds out the prospect of satisfactorily resolving irreconcilable claims [between scholarship and partisanship]. In such circumstances, we cannot steer between, but rather ricochet off, the rocks on either side of the channel, inevitably getting a bit bruised in the process."

Lurking behind this elegant image, unfortunately, is the "Cartesian anxiety" of the grand "Either/Or" imposed by Novick's dualistic conception of objectivity and relativism. Even Max Weber, whose essays "Science as a Vocation" and "Politics as a Vocation" remain the locus classicus for such discussions, entertained at least the possibility of scholarship helping individuals clarify the meaning of their partisan commitments. While there may be no ultimate resolution of this conflict, Novick's stark, Nietzschean formulation of the dilemma is less attractive, and also less consistent with the position of pragmatic hermeneutics, than the anguished but resolute stance Weber chose to adopt. The conflict between commitments to historical study and political action can certainly be poignant, and its results can be tragic, yet despair is hardly the only response to that realization.

Inevitably, many historians will be especially interested in Novick's account of another widely discussed controversy in the historical profession during the last decade, the David Abraham case. To his credit, Novick makes no pretense to neutrality, noting at the outset that Abraham "was my student, and is my good friend." Novick contends that the "hyperobjectivism" of historians reacting against postmodernist challenges to empiricism lay behind the "persecution" of Abraham. After previously having been denied tenure at Princeton University,

93 Weber's essays are most accessible in From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology, eds. and trans. Hans Gersh and C. Wright Mills (New York, 1946), 77–156. Unfortunately, there are problems with the translation of these essays that have led to considerable confusion concerning Weber's meaning, a problem I have discussed in Guettari's Vision, 540-42, 407 nn. 92, 93. See also Wolfgang Schluchter's analysis of these essays in Schluchter and Guenther Roth, Max Weber's Vision of History: Ethics and Methods (Berkeley, Calif., 1979).
Abraham was denied employment elsewhere, at least in part because of factual errors in his neo-Marxist study of Weimar Germany, errors discovered by other historians and later admitted by Abraham himself to be "inexcusable." Whether or not this is a case of academic freedom or even a case turning on the question of objectivity are questions historians will have to answer for themselves. Novick offers the two most plausible readings of the entire sad affair: "Professional historians might sympathize with Abraham," he writes, "but found it awkward and embarrassing to defend one who had confessed to numerous 'inexcusable' errors, let alone hire him." Alternately, Abraham's champions were more upset by the tactics of his critics, notably Gerald Feldman and Henry Turner, than they were by Abraham's own mistakes. In their view, according to Novick, "the 'bottom line'—Turner and Feldman triumphant, and Abraham out of the profession—was a striking demonstration of the continued power of the empiricist-objectivist alliance."27

Novick discusses recent challenges to that alliance in a chapter called "The Center Does Not Hold." This may prove the most valuable part of the book for many historians curious about contemporary critical debates but unable to keep up with rapidly shifting fashions across the wide range of scholarly disciplines. Novick moves sure-footedly through the quicksand of postmodernism, arguing that scholars from a variety of backgrounds are converging toward the position that objectivity is an illusion. "Most crucially, and across the board, the notion of a determinate and unitary truth about the physical or social world, approachable if not ultimately reachable, came to be seen by a growing number of scholars as a chimera." The principal contributors to this convergence were T. H. Kuhn, who confessed in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions that "the notion of a match between the ontology of a theory and its 'real' counterpart in nature now seems to me illusive in principle"; Michel Foucault, who demonstrated the ubiquitous alliance between power and systems of knowledge; the philosophers of anti-foundationalism, Richard J. Bernstein, Nelson Goodman, Hilary Putnam, and Richard Rorty; and literary critics such as Jacques Derrida, Stanley Fish, and Edward Said. All of these diverse thinkers challenged assumptions of determinate referential meanings and advanced various—and hardly compatible—theories concerning the construction of meanings in linguistic codes by human communities and traditions. Novick also surveys relevant developments in the social sciences, paying particular attention to the influential writings of Clifford Geertz on interpreting cultures, Paul Ricoeur and Charles Taylor on the inescapability of hermeneutics, the rise of critical legal studies (the ambiguous epistemological assumptions of which he does not probe very deeply), and finally recent developments in psychoanalysis that conflict with Sigmund Freud's own conception of his "science."28 When Novick steps back to assess the significance

of these critics of objectivism, his grip is, understandably, less sure. He points out that defenders of traditional realist epistemologies have had no new ideas to offer in response to the barrage of postmodernism. "It is no criticism of the defenders of traditional epistemologies," he concludes blithely, "whether of the left or of the right, to note that they offered very few new arguments for... the objectivist program." Most, he notes, simply cried "Back to Popper!" and left it at that. Announcements of the death of objectivism, Novick realizes, are premature.26

There is an alternative to the categories of objectivism and relativism. Novick acknowledges its existence, but he rejects it so abruptly that he leaves readers with a bleak assessment of history's prospects in a world in which all knowledge claims are greeted with suspicion. His pessimism seems to me unwarranted. The profession is bursting with the new ideas and fresh energy of historians who represent groups previously excluded from academic life, historians who explore the lives of people previously ignored by those who thought they could impose their own views of what mattered in the past. The fragmentation of the profession into numerous sub-specialties makes life more difficult for historians, but the resulting proliferation of historical knowledge wonderfully broadens and deepens our appreciation of the diversity of human experience. Poststructuralists have made us aware that telling any story prevents us from telling another story that might be told as well, but the resulting self-consciousness about our responsibility to exercise judgment may at last doom the simple-minded objectivist myth. Novick is less confident about this outcome. He offers only a brief discussion of the alternative that is attracting a growing number of scholars, reliance on "communities of the competent" to advance knowledge— even if those communities must constantly be expanded and those advances are only provisional. In dismissing this strategy, and particularly Rorty's version of it as "the conversation that is us," as just another form of self-satisfied "bourgeois mystification," Novick slides over a crucial distinction between C. S. Peirce's ideas and those of James and Dewey. Whereas Peirce sought to find a logic of inquiry that would eventually but inevitably yield Truth, James and Dewey placed their confidence in free-floating communities of inquiry whose results could never achieve that status. That confusion may also explain why Novick, in his concluding chapter, "There Was No King in Israel," so puzzlingly underestimates the importance of recent writings by Thomas L. Haskell and David A. Hollinger, which he characterizes as nothing more than a futile effort to "stake out an epistemological 'vital center.'"28

Both Hollinger and Haskell have argued for the value of knowledge that emerges from communities of inquiry, knowledge that is rooted in nothing more

28 Novick, That Noble Dream, 571–72, 628.
stable, but also nothing less precious, than the contested traditions that constitute our culture and give us our moorings. More in the Deweyan spirit of Bernstein than in the increasingly Derridean spirit of Rorty, Hollinger and Haskell have endorsed what Haskell calls "the moderate historicism that . . . provides a safe haven" for principles that our culture will continue to cherish even though we now realize the metaphysical ground has been pulled out from under us. Our convictions can be rooted in conventions rather than Truth and still have important consequences, as Haskell has demonstrated brilliantly in the pages of the American Historical Review.71 Novick's allusion to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s Vital Center (1949) seems more than casual, since he explicitly likens Hollinger's efforts to "those of the postwar historians who had dealt with the interwar relativist critique by a strategy of 'restriction through partial incorporation.'" Here, too, Novick misses the point of the pragmatic hermeneutics that characterized the work of earlier historicists and that marks the work of Haskell and Hollinger as well. They are not auditioning for "the role of centrist statesman" he reserves for them, nor are they merely "seeking to neutralize the most radical implications" of postmodernist thought.72 They are instead trying once more to convince American historians that there is an alternative to the sterile dichotomy between objectivism and relativism. Their position is neither old-fashioned realism nor new-fangled nihilism. As Haskell has written,

There is fear in some quarters that by assigning convention and history such a large role in moral thinking, we open the door to all the worst excesses of the neo-Nietzschians. In my view, that fear is misplaced. By mapping more precisely the pale beyond which morality is irredeemably historical, we do concede some territory to the criterionless wilderness and bring a regrettable measure of satisfaction to the radical wing of historicism. But we also demarcate a spacious domain within which rights and other claims of objective moral knowledge can enjoy something like "universal" sway. That historically defensible sense of objectivity, that provisional immunity to incursions of time, place, and circumstance, is all we can realistically hope for. More important, it is also all we need.55

Despite Novick's pessimistic assessment of the chances that anyone will listen to Hollinger's and Haskell's ideas, and despite his confident proclamation that, "as a broad community of discourse, . . . the discipline of history [has] ceased to


55 Novick, That Noble Dream, 626.

exist," it is possible to see glimmerings of a morally alert moderate historicism elsewhere in the profession—and not only on its margins. In his eloquent AHA presidential address of 1976, Gordon Wright unashamedly invoked the model of Jean Jaurès as a scholar and activist whose writings and life reflected the social democratic values he embraced. Wright further endorsed the historian's duty to commit what David Hackett Fischer has called "the moralistic fallacy." "For some of us, at least," Wright suggested, "our search for truth ought to be quite consciously suffused by a commitment to some deeply held humane values. The effort to keep these two goals in balance may be precarious; but if we can manage it, perhaps we will be on the way to re-establishing the role of history as one—and not the least—of what we might fairly call the moral arts." While Wright discarded the Victorian notion of the "moral sciences" just as he discarded the Victorian notion of history as a science, he preserved the conviction that beyond relativism and objectivity lies a fertile field that historians can cultivate in their work.

Likewise, William H. McNeill called on historians to attend to all the complexities of world civilization in constructing their "mythhistories." Even if we concede that the objectivist dream of "eternal and universal Truth about human behavior is an unattainable goal," we can still work to make our versions of the past truer because they are more comprehensive, more multidimensional, more frankly tentative in tone, and more sensitive to the diversities of human cultures than our predecessors' accounts have been. In his conception of history, McNeill, like Wright, moved beyond the dichotomy between facts and beliefs. He combined a Jamesian will to believe in the possibility that mythistory can motivate a culture to live up to its collective aspirations with a Deweyan commitment to social action: mythistory, in his words, can be "a useful instrument for piloting human groups in their encounters with one another and the natural environment."

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34 Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 628. On this issue, see also John Toews, "Perspectives on 'The Old History and the New': A Comment," *AHR*, 94 (June 1989): 697-98. Reflecting on the disagreements between Theodore S. Hamerow and Gertrude Himmelfarb on the one hand, and Lawrence Levine and Joel Wallach Scott on the other, Toews argues that "even among opposing representatives of the new and the old... there persist significant areas of continuity and agreement in theoretical assumptions and moral values... The point is that [these historians] do not articulate incommensurable perspectives but arguable positions in a meaningful dialogue. They are part of a historical discourse about the nature of the past and its relationship to the present that possesses significant elements of continuity with the often conflicting but sometimes complementary relationship between two traditional master narratives connecting memory and hope that can be traced back at least as far as the eighteenth century: the story of the struggle for emancipation and the story of the struggle for social integration and social unity. The expansion of these stories to include those previously defined as strangers in our midst or 'others' beyond our borders will undoubtedly entail the production of more complex interactive and open-ended narratives, but to equate such expansive revisionism of the stories of liberation and inclusion with the collapse of historical coherence is simply to assume the universality of the perspective of those for whom liberation is grounded on domination and citizenship entails pledge and exclusion."


In his conclusion, Novick laments that by the 1980s, "there was no king in Israel," and, as a result, "every man did that which was right in his own eyes." But, for American historians, the prospect seems less bleak. We need not choose between the absolute authority of facts and the anarchy of idiosyncratic interpretations, as Novick's biblical image suggests. We can, of course, deny, as Novick does, that any alternative exists to the equally indefensible positions of objectivism and relativism. But we can also choose to continue testing the pragmatic value of moderate historicism, an option that has appealed to historians from Robinson and Becker to Wright and McNeill. This approach acknowledges both the indispensability of the scientific method of verifying facts and the equally indispensable hermeneutic method of interpreting the meanings of the past we seek to explain.

Some readers will doubtless find my perspective, which a friendly critic has termed "Dewey-eyed," at least as problematical as the old scientific history or the newest radical historicism. They may be right. One of the most important contributions of Novick's book is its demonstration, at the level of simple empirical fact, that American historians over the course of the last century have changed their minds about many crucial questions, sometimes because of new information but often simply because of new ways of thinking. By compiling and skillfully presenting this mountain of evidence, Novick has made more difficult positivist protests about the sovereignty of facts in a historical discourse that has reflected so clearly the shifting values of a changing culture. Historians have not simply shown the past "wie es eigentlich gewesen," as Ranke insisted they should, nor have they shown clearly "the events which happened in the past," as Thucydides claimed to do. As Leonard Krieger has demonstrated, historians have almost always smuggled themselves into their accounts, either explicitly by presenting philosophies of history or implicitly by providing coherence through narratives calculated to provide coherence.

American historians, Novick's study demonstrates, have done the same. Yet neither does That Noble Dream confirm the suspicions of relativists who doubt the reliability of everything in all historical accounts. Through a combination of imagination, technology, and diligence, historians have compiled hard data that now make impossible some versions of the past that once passed as truth. Only within this realm of the verifiable can competing interpretations survive the scrutiny of the community of professional historians.

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37 Novick, That Noble Dream, 628.
38 Krieger, in Time's Reasons, 107–36, explained why the historicism that emerged in the late nineteenth century constitutes the notable exception to this general rule.
39 While deconstruction can be a powerful tool for critics interested primarily in the indeterminacy of meanings conveyed by texts, its utility for many historians is more limited. I have discussed in some detail my misgivings about deconstruction in "Deconstruction and Hermeneutics as Strategies for Intellectual History." While some historians continue blithely to recommend that their colleagues incorporate deconstructivist insights into their work, such enthusiasts seem to me to have misunderstood Derrida's point. If he is correct, we cannot do history any more than we can do philosophy. We should simply concede the primacy of rhetoric over logic and become poets, as Derrida himself has done over the last decade. Historians longing to exercise their creative urge will find such an option attractive, while those who conceive of history as a social practice rather than an exercise of the imagination may find it less compelling. Derrida himself has recently illustrated,
It is precisely because the indeterminacy of truth and the historicity of reason are now widely conceded that we can no longer claim to find objectivity—in science or in history. It is, furthermore, precisely for that reason that historians must insist on the indispensability of historical studies as one of the most fruitful forms of inquiry in a world of uncertainty. We cannot have, nor should we want, the self-righteous smugness of earlier generations that we have “got it right” once and for all. But that should not cause us to despair about our prospects for making progress. Beyond the noble dream of scientific objectivity and the nightmare of complete relativism lies the terrain of pragmatic truth, which provides us with hypotheses, provisional syntheses, imaginative but warranted interpretations, which then provide the basis for continuing inquiry and experimentation. Such historical writing can provide knowledge that is useful even if it must be tentative. It is within that realm that historical truth—like all truth in a world that has moved beyond the discredited dualisms of both positivism and idealism—must be made, questioned, and reinterpreted. As historians, we cannot aspire to more than a pragmatic hermeneutics that relies on the methods of science and the interpretation of meanings. But we should not aspire to less.

however inadvertently, the perils of deconstruction for historical interpretation. In his essay “Like the Sound of the Sea Deep within a Shell: Paul de Man’s War,” originally published in Critical Inquiry and included in Werner Hamacher, et al., eds., Responses: On Paul de Man’s Wartime Journalism (Lincoln, Neb., 1988), 127–64, Derrida probes beneath the surface of de Man’s collaborationist writings to reveal an altogether predictable counterstrategic subtext. Explaining away the most notoriously anti-Semitic of de Man’s contributions to Le Soir, “Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle,” March 4, 1941, Derrida contends that “the whole article is organized as an indictment of vulgar antijudaism.” Even more breathtakingly, Derrida then asserts that “to judge, to condemn the work or the man on the basis of what was a brief episode, to call for closing, that is to say, at least figuratively, for censoring or burning his books is to reproduce the exterminating gesture against which one accuses de Man of not having armed himself sooner with the necessary vigilance.” Readers of recent debates may find this rhetorical strategy familiar, since critics of deconstruction are not infrequently accused of similar (if less apocalyptic) intolerance. The misrepresentation here, however, is especially revealing. Some charges leveled at de Man have surely been intemperate and wrong-headed; it is foolish to dismiss deconstruction on the basis of de Man’s personal values. But to compare the responses of de Man’s critics with an “exterminating gesture” that became reality exemplifies precisely the blurring of texts with lived experience that has troubled radical critics of deconstruction ranging from Foucault to Habermas. Although deconstruction should survive the attacks of de Man’s critics, as a tool for historians it may not survive Derrida’s defense. For an antidote to Derrida’s creative but “anthistorical” reading of de Man’s text, see the sophisticated analysis in William Flesch, “Ancestral Voices: De Man and His Defenders,” in Response, 174–84. This entire unfortunate incident powerfully illustrates why historians must consult not only texts but contexts, and not only linguistic expressions but the realities of lived experience beyond language, in their always imperfect attempts to understand and interpret the past for the present.