

A Critical Review of Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream*

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Part I: An Analytic Overview

Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* leverages the American historical discipline's conceptualization of "objectivity" to explore how major historical events and periods, such as the First World War or the student protests during the late 1960s, influenced historians' understandings of how best to undertake their craft. Novick's periodization surfaces four distinct eras, each with its own treatment of the fickle "objectivity question."

1884- 1914: The Rankean Consensus

In the first period, delineated by the founding of the American Historical Association (AHA) on one end and the outbreak of the Great War on the other end, the American historical profession was captured by the figure and epistemology of German historian Leopold von Ranke. Ranke's famous dictum, namely that the historian's task is to judge the past "as it essentially was," promoted the view that the historian's function was to gather source-based evidence and to let it speak for itself (Novick 1988: 28). Ranke's seeming dissociation with German nationalism in favor of empiricism was particularly appealing to American historians, and helped cement his image as the father of historical objectivity (ibid: 27). Yet as Novick points out, Ranke did embrace a "pantheistic state-worship" by focusing on the great men of history, whose actions defined particular historical periods and "revealed God's work" (ibid: 28). Thus whereas in the US Ranke was treated as "the mythic hero of empirical science," in Germany he was perceived as "continuing the German idealist tradition" (ibid: 28).

The founding of German-style research universities, like the University of Chicago and Johns Hopkins University, seemed a perfect institutionalization of Ranke's "assiduity and scrupulosity of research," along with his "critical treatment of a wide range of previously unused sources" and his "development of the seminar for the training of scholars" (ibid: 26). In this era, where "scienticity was the hallmark of the modern and the authoritative," the ideal historian was "the man who would cross an ocean to verify a comma" (ibid: 20; 23). A simplified version of Francis Bacon's inductivism, which glorified "a rigidly empirical approach" where "observations"

were sacred” and hypotheses were dismissed as unscientific “phantoms” that dared to “go beyond what could be directly observed,” became the working epistemological framework of the American historical profession (ibid: 34). Historians optimistically believed that their cumulative scholarship would reach a “saturation point,” for “the patient manufacture of four-square factualist bricks to be fitted together in the ultimate objective history [...] offered an almost tangible image of steady, cumulative progress” (ibid: 39-40; 56).

Ultimately, the degree of “ideological homogeneity” amongst historians was a result of (1) the constraining influence of wealthy donors exerted via university trustees and administrators; (2) the migration out of the profession by its more “activist” practitioners into new policy-oriented social science disciplines; and (3) the demographic composition of the AHA, where “there were no professional historians of recent immigrant background, none of working-class origin, and hardly any who were not Protestant” (ibid: 61; 68-69). Attempts to reinforce a “conservative evolutionist” consensus were conducted by promoting “national” history, much of which was racist, imperialistic, and xenophobic (ibid: 72; 74). Yet some cracks in the Rankean consensus began to emerge in the years immediately preceding WWI, personified by the rise of the new, progressive historians, to which we now turn.

1914 - 1940: The Interwar Progressive Challenge

The new, progressive historians, of whom Charles Beard and Carl Becker were the most influential practitioners, “had lost faith in the conservative political pieties of their profession [...] and] their religious faith as well. The belief in secular progress was “almost the only vital conviction left to us.” This belief – their confidence in the prospect of continuous amelioration “within the system” – kept their ideological heterodoxy from transgressing the limits of the accommodationist” (ibid: 97). They stressed “in their programmatic statements [...] the present uses of history: what would later be denominated, pejoratively, as “presentism”” (ibid: 98). Both Beard and Becker “mocked the notion that the facts speak for themselves” and dismissed the “objective reconstruction of the past” as “a vacuous ideal” (ibid: 254). Their influence (and relativist bent) grew during the course and aftermath of WWI. Indeed, the Great War shook historians’ allegiance to the “conservative evolutionist” consensus of the late 19th century as “many historians lost their optimism and faith in progress which [...] had grounded their faith in objectivity” and as the origins of the Great War itself “became the subject of interminable historical controversy” (ibid: 111). The discipline was torn by an attachment to Germany, where many American historians had studied, and

“Anglophilia,” which often carried the day (ibid: 112). American historians watched as their German counterparts embraced a militarist propaganda to sanction the actions of the German state, and the latter’s betrayal of objectivism was clear to all (ibid: 115). Yet the new historians’ presentism led to a countervailing belief that the participation of historians in the war effort “would demonstrate the usefulness of history” (ibid: 117). Thus many historians during WWI did participate in the “provision of serviceable propaganda” aimed at constructing a “sound and wholesome public opinion” (ibid: 118).

Post-war intra-disciplinary reflection contributed to the destabilization of the objectivist consensus: “History,” wrote James Robinson, “does not seem to stop any more” (ibid: 131). A sense of self-skepticism, mirroring the modernist turn in art, began to pervade (ibid: 134). Einstein’s theory of relativity, ill-understood by historians, introduced the belief that “things changed with the position of the observer,” and this was reinforced in the parallel field of jurisprudence by the Legal Realism of Oliver Wendell Holmes and Karl Llewellyn, which undermined the model of the “impartial judge” that many historians sought to emulate (ibid: 137; 145-150). Science was partially de-mystified as historical pragmatists advanced the view that “like any other human activity, [science] was rooted in human interests, and reflected those interests” (ibid: 152). Even those opposed to the relativist turn in the interwar period often believed that “the greatest sin of the relativists was not so much that they were wrong about the situation they described, but that they weren’t sufficiently unhappy about it” (ibid: 166).

Decreased research funding in light of the Great Depression, combined with the belief that the professionalization of the discipline had partially contributed to the illusory “conservative evolutionism” of the pre-war era, led to “a widespread sense that the professional project had stalled” (ibid: 178). The inability of the historical profession to combat “regionalism” and promote “national histories” – the belief that “truth is one” – was a further blow to the AHA (ibid: 180). This was epitomized by the collapse of the racist consensus regarding the Civil War as “divergent attitudes on black inferiority led, directly or indirectly, to historiographical dissensus” (ibid: 225). The “revisionist school of Civil War historiography” emerging in the interwar period “argued that inept statecraft and irresponsible extremism had produced a needless war,” in contradistinction to the traditionalist interpretation, which stressed “constitutional issues” as the war’s causes and characterized Reconstruction as the Northern imposition of a “regime of humiliation, corruption, and exploitation by carpetbaggers” upon the South (ibid: 237; 231). Finally, an ideological cleavage began to emerge in the profession: defenders of the pre-war conception of objectivity and for the

study of the “past for its own sake” were “largely from the right,” whereas its relativist critics who advocated for “the historian’s responsibility to descend from the ivory tower and contribute to social needs” usually came “from the moderate left” (ibid: 265; 272). The interwar period was thus one of increased ideological divergence, self-skepticism often bordering on cynicism, and the undermining of the pre-war Rankean consensus.

1941-1967: The Postwar Reconstruction of Objectivism

The mobilization of the historical profession during WWII to fight the right-wing totalitarianism of Hitler’s fascism, and its continuation during the Cold War to “rearm the West spiritually for the battle with the” communist totalitarianism of the Soviet Union, pushed “moderate liberals and moderate conservatives [...] to join forces” and to attack the relativism that had flourished in the interwar period (ibid: 282). Historical relativism was characterized as implicitly supportive of authoritarian modes of political and socioeconomic organization, and its critics “often included personal attacks on Beard and Becker” (ibid: 290). A renewed faith in science took on a geopolitical frame: “The science of the West was autonomous, empirical, and objective; that of the totalitarians was subordinated to the state, “ideological,” and tendentious” (ibid: 293). Nevertheless, government service during the war, particularly in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), enhanced “historians’ capacity for identifying with those who exercise power: a step forward for empathy, a step backward for critical distance” (ibid: 304). Thus the reconstruction of objectivism was far from ideologically neutral; rather, it took the defense of the West as its ideological foundation. Western civilization courses in American universities promoted American-centric Whiggish narratives, where “history is the record of the progression of reason of liberty” towards “modern science and democracy, American style” (ibid: 313).

Yet the reconstruction of objectivism post-WWII was far from exclusively an organic phenomenon. In congruence with the iciest period of the Cold War and the rise of McCarthyism, “the late forties and fifties saw a wide-ranging effort to remove “reducators” from American campuses – an effort which resulted in hundreds of dismissals and a climate of caution and self-censorship which endured for several years” (ibid: 325). Communist historians were dismissed on the grounds that they were “incapable of impartiality or objectivity” (ibid: 326). At the University of California, faculty were forced to sign a “loyalty oath;” those who refused were dismissed (ibid: 329). The most politically correct historical perspective of the post-WWII period was one which shunned the inter-class struggles emphasized by the Progressive interwar historians and instead

emphasized consensus around the view that the “defense of freedom [was] the thread which wove American history together” (ibid: 333). Only the history department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison defended Beard, Becker, and interwar progressives from post-WWII attack (ibid: 346).

A postwar settlement of the “race” question also helped contribute to a convergence of historical interpretation of the Civil War and the civil rights movement: “the objective truth of scientific antiracialism” and the “ever increasing commitment of historians to racial equality” reduced the cleavage between racist traditionalists and egalitarian progressives that existed in the interwar period (ibid: 348-349). Additionally, the recognition that professional historians had lost their ability to influence pre-collegiate history education contributed to a re-emergence of an inward drive to professionalize: the discipline “gloried in its autonomy from the norms of social science,” in its devotion to the study of “the past for its own sake,” and in its liberation from the “lay audience” (ibid: 362; 374). English translations of Max Weber’s work gained particular influence amongst historians, who embraced a “somewhat oversimplified version of his doctrine of value freedom in scholarship, and the substitution of neutral for evocative language” (ibid: 383). A latent cleavage amongst those who likened history to art and those who likened it to science remained, but “in the era of consensus and comity, most historians were happy to collapse the distinction” (ibid: 386). The AHA’s membership grew rapidly in response to the rise in college enrollment and research funding that accompanied postwar economic growth, enhancing “professional self-confidence” (ibid). Quality and quantity of scholarship increased exponentially, undermining the skepticism of the interwar relativists regarding historiographical progress (ibid: 380). Indeed, what one historian described as the “Era of No Hard Feelings” featured attempts to “historicize relativism” as “a reflection of a moment in American cultural history,” and thus “to subtly undermine it, to suggest that it [was] *vieux jeu*” (ibid: 405-406).

1967 - Present: The Crisis of Objectivism

With the American ideological shift to the left during the late 1960s in opposition to the Vietnam war and then the subsequent u-turn to the right under Ronald Reagan, the “consensus which provided the foundation for the comity congenial to objectivity collapsed, and it was not to be reconstructed in subsequent decades [...] consensus was replaced first by polarization, then by fragmentation; affirmation, by negativity, confusion, apathy, and uncertainty” (ibid: 415). While most historians remained moderates, the ‘center’ was discredited by the rise of “substantial and systematically “oppositional” historiographical tendencies” (ibid: 417). The new leftist historians

were bred primarily at Wisconsin-Madison and Columbia – the former having always been a leftist, progressive department, and the latter being located in one of America’s most liberal cities (ibid: 420). One group of new leftist historians, featuring Staughton Lynd, Howard Zinn, and Jesse Lemisch, was younger, more countercultural and activist; another group, featuring Eugene Genovese, Christopher Lasch, and James Weinstein, was better established, with a Communist background, and more traditionalist in scholarly inclination (ibid: 428). These scholars characterized themselves as “disinterested” and “evenhanded,” being able to unmask the ideological agendas that underlay their “present-minded” or “partisan” enemies (ibid: 436). Eventually, with the crushing of the Prague Spring, along with the failure of the Parisian events of May and of Eurocommunism to bring about substantial political reform, the new leftist historians fell into a state of “disillusionment” (ibid: 444). As they lost their self-confidence, conservative historians attempted to “tar” all cold war revisionists “with the New Left brush, and [to make them] collectively responsible for whatever errors or exaggerations were contained in the work of anyone so designated” (ibid: 450).

The rise of black nationalism and the second wave of feminism also promoted a relativist view that every group should act as its own historian. As one black historian wrote at the time, “in these days, any white man who devotes himself to teaching and writing about black history must have the fortitude and strength of a bull elephant, because blacks will let him know that his presence is unwanted and undesirable” (ibid: 476). Although some Jewish historians did write about black history, they were clearly in the minority (ibid: 479). The black historiography generally emphasized the interrelated themes of “resistance” against structures of domination and “the autonomy of the black community and culture vis-à-vis white America” (ibid: 486). Similar developments occurred in the flourishing field of women’s history, and “by the late 1970s the assertion that women's history could only be legitimately written from a feminist standpoint was no longer being argued; it was a settled question, beyond argument” (ibid: 496). The explicit argument made by these historians is that the ability to write ‘objectively’ about particular historical issues is fundamentally dependent upon one’s identity.

The rise of post-structuralist or post-modern social science and philosophy during the period, particularly in the writings of Thomas Kuhn, Michel Foucault, and Clifford Geertz, also impacted the historical profession. Kuhn’s theory of scientific revolutions as “paradigm shifts” where “a new paradigm might deal more satisfactorily with some anomalies which had proven recalcitrant under the old, but the older paradigm usually explained many things which the new one

could not,” undermined the objectivist belief in the linear accumulation of knowledge (ibid: 529-530). Michel Foucault’s concern with how social institutions and knowledge structure relations of power, “disciplining,” if not outright “constituting” subjects, destabilized the previously naturalized and apolitical neutrality of all social science disciplines (ibid: 536-537). And Clifford Geertz’s interpretivist turn, delivered in a “lively, highly personal, and aphoristic style,” attacked positivist scholarship and advocated for a turn to a semiotic scholarship that would emphasize meaning-making from the interpretation of culturally and linguistically-embedded signs and symbols (ibid: 552-553). The legal discipline saw the rise of the Critical Legal Studies movement, which renounced the “very notion of a coherent and predictable jurisprudence,” and hence undermined the belief in the law’s rationality and neutrality much as the Legal Realists had done during the interwar period (ibid: 555-556).

All of the foregoing influences began to pervade the historical profession, particularly given the fact that “the expansion of history into new realms inevitably involved historians crossing disciplinary boundaries” (ibid: 584). Indeed, the “sheer size of the historical profession necessarily had fragmenting influences” (ibid: 580). Those opposed to the relativism of post-structuralists and interpretivists fired back with their own excessive zeal for “hyperobjectivist” scholarship (ibid: 606). In one case, notable but defensible mistakes in the handling of sources by David Abraham, a young historian fresh out of graduate school at the University of Chicago who had just published a Marxist interpretation of the Weimar republic’s collapse with Princeton University Press, were leveraged by Henry Turner of Yale and Gerald Feldman at the University of California-Berkeley to mount an intimidation campaign that forced him out of the profession (ibid: 612-621). Thus the opposition between various “rhetorical relativists” on the one end and “hyperobjectivists” on the other engendered a degree of fragmentation “beyond any hope of unification” (ibid: 592). Consequently, “on the “objectivity question” [...] discourse across the discipline [has] effectively collapsed” (ibid). “As a community of scholars united by common aims, common standards, and common purposes,” Novick concludes, “the discipline of history had ceased to exist” (ibid: 628).

Part II: A Critical Appraisal

Novick’s monumental effort to “provoke my fellow historians to greater self-consciousness about the nature of our activity” is as commendable as it is ambitious (ibid: 628-629). I have two primary criticisms to offer: The first is the degree to which the deck is stacked ‘against’ objectivism in the very way Novick constructs his narrative; the second is the degree to which Novick fails to

explicitly address a latent theme within his narrative: namely, the desirability of an instrumentalist use of historiography.

On the first point, the prevailing ontological approach of Novick's narrative, which is only manifestly acknowledged on the second-to-last page of his book, is that "the evolution of historians' attitudes on the objectivity question has always been closely tied to changing social, political, cultural, and professional contexts" (ibid: 628). This argument echoes Charles Beard's definition of relativism, namely that "every historian's work [...] bears a relation to his own personality and the age and circumstances in which he lives" (ibid: 262). In other words, by focusing on how social change has influenced the historical profession's treatment of "the objectivity question," one cannot help but feel as if any claims to empirical objectivism are both ahistorical and indefensible. Thus while I find Novick fairly successful in ensuring that "both sets of arguments are fully, and I hope fairly, set forth in the body of work," the very structure of Novick's narrative stacks the deck clearly in favor of his own perspective that historical objectivity is "not just essentially contested, but essentially confused" (ibid: 6). My own view is that just as there is an expression referencing the "fog of war," or the idea that war is such a complicated phenomenon that it is impossible for any single individual to comprehend it in its totality, we could equally reference the "fog of history," or the notion that most historical phenomena that are of scholarly interest are complex and correspondingly elusive. Yet our inability to do justice to the 'thickness' of history should not lead us to the facile conclusion that there is no such thing as a "true" sequence of historical events. Objectivism should thus be treated as an ideal to strive for, one grounded in the belief that objective truth exists, and that while as scholars we lack the capacity to fully comprehend and capture it, we must nonetheless do our best to approximate it.

On the second point, Novick continually references, but does not directly tackle, what I perceive to be the latent narrative of his work: namely, the perennial debate regarding the desirability of an instrumentalist treatment of history. This theme is surfaced by Novick's discussion of the social-policy-centered presentism of Progressive interwar historians and by the debate within the profession regarding whether (and how) to engage with the lay public, government agencies, and pre-collegiate history teachers. While this issue is related to the objectivity question, it is, I think, conceptually distinct from it. It is not obvious which way Novick leans on this question, although my interpretation is that he is more sympathetic, or at least willing to justify and excuse, the undermining of historical objectivity in the name of asserting the instrumental relevance of historiography and the historical profession. In particular, I note this

tendency in Novick's fairly cavalier treatment of arguments that the study of history should be valuable "for its own sake" – in fact, I did not note a single extensive discussion of scholarly arguments in defense of this position (even as Novick spends much (if not most) of his book charting the lineage of arguments against it). A more explicit treatment of this second theme on Novick's part would not only correct what may be my mischaracterization of his provision, but would also tackle what emerges as perhaps the most important challenge that has faced, and continues to face, the historical profession.