



Carl Becker, Professor Novick, and Me; or, Cheer Up, Professor N.!

J. H. Hexter

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*AHR Forum: Peter Novick's That Noble Dream:
The Objectivity Question and the Future of the
Historical Profession*

The following essays are the products of critiques (and a reply by Peter Novick) delivered orally on December 28, 1990, at the Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, New York. The panel was organized by Dorothy Ross, who initiated the session by introducing the participants and outlining their points of view. Here she appends an afterword, which summarizes the discussion and includes some comments made from the floor. The panel attracted a large crowd that filled the aisles, the floor space in back of the room, and spilled into the corridor outside—The Editor

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J. H. HEXTER

IN THE NEXT LITTLE WHILE, I propose to show that my hitherto-expressed views on Carl L. Becker (1873–1945) do better justice to him than do those of Professor Novick, hereafter Professor N. Further, I hope to show that this betterness has implications subversive to the theme of Professor N.'s book *That Noble Dream*. Its theme is that, from its beginning, the historical profession in the United States burned incense before the One True God of Objectivity. Between the World Wars, iconoclasts—the “new historians”—set about systematically desecrating the altar of that paltry god to the distress of the true believers. After the Second World War, however, the orthodox reasserted themselves, purified the temple of objectivity, and resumed their dismal rites. In the 1960s, however, the “ideological consensus” in support of objectivity “collapsed, . . . not to be reconstructed in subsequent decades.”¹ *That Noble Dream* ends in 1988 with an almost touching epitaph for the dead donkey of Objectivity.

In those days there was no king in Israel;
every man did that which was right in his own eyes.²

¹ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (New York, 1988), 415.

² Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 628, quoting Judges 21:25.

The book sets forth "the objectivity question," as it worked itself out among Americanists, in the World-Historical Framework provided by the First World War, the Great Depression, the Second World War, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and the Student Revolution of the later 1960s and the 1970s—big H History, indeed. Near the center of Professor N.'s big H History stood a quintessentially small h historian, Carl Becker.

In his presidential address to the American Historical Association in 1931, "Everyman His Own Historian," Becker set off the avalanche that for a while buried the "objectivists." Becker's address showed that the goal of a—I quote Professor N.—"comprehensive, definitive objective reconstruction of the past was not just unattainable in the past, but a vacuous idea in principle."³ Two years after Becker, and from the same platform, Charles Beard preached a lay sermon on relativism that gave Professor N. the title for his book.⁴ He thereby incited one of those professional donnybrooks for which he had an insatiable appetite. Yet his bully use of his bully pulpit was of less long-term effect in eroding the complacent overconfidence of the orthodox "scientific" historians than was the gentle penetrating action of Becker's emollient discourse; at the end of Becker's address, an applauding audience had risen to its feet. So far, so good.

Here, however, Professor N.'s big H History and my small h history part ways on how to read Carl Becker. Professor N., examining the *mentalité* of the historical profession in the United States in the context of the *mentalité* of the West, in the context of the *histoire totale* of the world for the past hundred years, thinks he is constrained to a panoramic vision. Therefore, he suggests, none of the hundreds and hundreds of people he shows in his historiographic Mardi Gras can be held by his camera long enough to allow the spectators to get a sense that they know whom they are looking at.

Professor N. was correct, however, in believing that, to get his enormous data mass in order, he needed at the outset a historiographical scaffolding. Without it, the whole enterprise becomes the sort of pack rat's *omnium gatherum* that Becker found so silly when set out as "scientific" history by his pompous peers.⁵ The scaffolding of Professor N.'s big H History starts him off with large questions, deep running tides, portentous rumbles. Gradually, the inquiries of *That Noble Dream* do pull closer to actual people; to several Big People at the top of the heap—Ranke, Marx, Freud, Sartre; to nobly heroic Charles Beard and less heroic Carl Becker; to the bottom of the heap, where one finds "objectivist," ignoble me.

Big H History has both costs and risks. As Professor N. makes clear especially in explicit and scandalous footnotes, the record of the past, like Everyman's memory and memos, is a lot of bits and pieces. Can small h history help us here? When a small h historian fixes his attention on a fragment of the past washed up on the littered beach of the present, he is likely to ask simple questions about it. What the devil is it? What was it for? Where is it from? How did it get here? What

³ "Everyman His Own Historian," in Carl Becker, *Everyman His Own Historian* (New York, 1935), 233–55; Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 254.

⁴ Charles A. Beard, "That Noble Dream," *AHR*, 41 (1935): 74–87.

⁵ Carl Becker, "Detachment and the Writing of History," *Atlantic Monthly*, 106 (1910): 524–36.

happened to it? Who in the world made this thing? What could he have had in mind? And how do I tell about this stuff?

Try to imagine a person who puts telling about that sort of thing—actually *writing history*—ahead of *being* a historian, Heraclitean doing ahead of Eleatic being. Well, on Carl Becker's word in 1941, his call to writing came some seven years *before* he considered *being* a historian as a vocation.⁶ Can one give credence to the alleged recollections of a small h historian, sixty-eight years old, as he wrote? Actually, I happen to know an eighty-year-old small h historian who does. His own call to his vocation came to him at age five. He crawled into the center of the quiet kindergarten circle, put his head down, and kicked up his heels. Squeals of peer group approval! His debut as a public wise guy! Ten years later in H. L. Mencken, he found his earliest role model. Perhaps, however, to pursue his vocation of a public publishing wise guy, he might need to know a little about something, history perhaps—why not? I do know that, at eighty, that wise guy still recalls vividly, as Becker alleged he did at sixty-eight, the earliest intimation of his own vocation to write history. Indeed, he has just described the onset of those intimations.

We have reached the point where visual aids are more effective than verbal arabesques. It is time for show-and-tell. Consider first Exhibits *small a* and *small b* on the next page.

We can see at once that the exhibits are from a seedy, abandoned neighborhood; hardly anybody is around, just two old gaffers, one coming up on four centuries old, Pascal; the other, Archimedes, over two thousand years old. The language of both the exhibits, while not actually shabby, is not all that fancy, either. And, while both contain a bit of intellectual show-boating, neither is a truly high-tech verbal operation. Indeed, palpably low-class; compare with *BIG C*.

There it is, the right stuff, the real McCoy! How really real it is the type faces show.

BIG C is a crowded page, as densely peopled with **names** as *small a* and *small b* are desolate. There are lots of recent celebs around and lots of recent fancy intellectual chit-chat out on the cutting edge of thought, rather like a cocktail party on Central Park West, Manhattan, in the apartment of a Professor of Philosophy.

The capitals bold-faced people are crowded into the first paragraph of *C*. That is, into considerably less than half of the exhibit. An even heavier concentration of fancy suffixes (in lower-case bold-face)—**-ean, -ian, -ic, -ism, -ist, -ity, -logy, -ysis, -yst**, no less than nineteen, is mixed in with all those people.

In the second paragraph of *BIG C*, the author briefly appears to be recuperating from the alarming attack of -ysis he suffered in Paragraph 1, alas! only to succumb to an onslaught of bold-face lower-case "coherences" and "correspondences." So acute is this rare infection that the plague of polysyllaby is just about as lethal in the second paragraph as in the first.

Then suddenly the deadly chatter of people outshouting each other with overwrought abstractions stops at the word "disciplines" four lines from the end

⁶ See Carl Becker, "The Art of Writing," *Detachment and the Writing of History* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1958), 122–24; and "Frederick Jackson Turner," in Becker, *Everyman*, 190–96.

a

We are apt to think of the past as dead, the future as nonexistent, the present alone as real; and prematurely wise or disillusioned counselors have urged us to burn always with "a hard, gemlike flame" in order to give "the highest quality to the moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake." This no doubt is what the glowworm does; but I think that man, who alone is properly aware that the present moment passes, can for that very reason make no good use of the present moment simply for its own sake. Strictly speaking, the present doesn't exist for us, or is at best no more than an infinitesimal point in time, gone before we can note it as present. Nevertheless, we must have a present; and so we create one by robbing the past, by holding on to the most recent events and pretending that they all belong to our immediate perceptions. If, for example, I raise my arm, the total event is a series of occurrences of which the first are past before the last have taken place; and yet you perceive it as a single movement executed in one present instant. This telescoping of successive events into a single instant philosophers call the "specious present." Doubtless they would assign rather narrow limits to the specious present; but I will willfully make a free use of it, and say that we can extend the specious present as much as we like. In common speech we do so: we speak of the "present hour," the "present year," the "present generation." Perhaps all living creatures have a specious present; but man has this superiority, as Pascal says, that he is aware of himself and the universe, can as it were hold himself at arm's length and with some measure of objectivity watch himself and his fellows functioning in the world during a brief span of allotted years. Of all the creatures, man alone has a specious present that may be deliberately and purposefully enlarged and diversified and enriched.

b

No sane contemporary scientist in his investigations of the physical world would disregard nineteenth-century advances in field theory, and no sane historian in his work would rule out of consideration insights achieved in the past century concerning the connection of class conflict with historical occurrences. But this is only to say that all men who are professionally committed to the quest of that elusive entity—the Truth—use all the tracking devices available to them at the time, and in the nature of things cannot use any device before it exists. And of course the adequacy of the historical search at any time is in some degree limited by the adequacy of the tracking devices. In this, too, the historian's situation is no different from that of the scientist. Adequate investigation of optical isomers in organic chemistry, for example, had to wait on the development of the techniques of spectroscopy. If this is what present-mindedness means, then present-mindedness is not just the condition of historical knowledge. For all knowledge at any time is obviously limited by the limits of the means of gaining knowledge at that time; and historians are simply in the same boat as all others whose business it is to know.

Now I do not believe that the proponents of present-mindedness mean anything as bland and innocuous as this. On the contrary I am fairly sure they mean that the historian's boat is different from, and a great deal more leaky than, let us say, the physicist's or the geologist's boat. What then is supposed to be the specific trouble with the historian's boat? The trouble, as the present-minded see it, can be described fairly simply. The present-minded contend that in writing history no historian can free himself of his total experience and that that experience is inextricably involved not only in the limits of knowledge but also in the passions, prejudices, assumptions and prepossessions, in the events, crises and tensions of his own day. Therefore those passions, prejudices, assumptions, prepossessions, events, crises and tensions of the historian's own day inevitably permeate what he writes about the past. This is the crucial allegation of the present-minded, and if it is wholly correct, the issue must be settled in their favor and the history-minded pack up their apodictic and categorical-imperative baggage and depart in silence. Frequently discussions of this crucial issue have got bogged down because the history-minded keep trying to prove that the historian can counteract the influence of his own day, while the present-minded keep saying that this is utterly impossible. And of course on this question the latter are quite right. A historian has no day but his own, so what is he going to counteract it with? He is in the situation of Archimedes who could find no fulcrum for the lever with which to move the Earth. Clearly if the historian is to be history-minded rather than present-minded he must find the means of being so in his own day, not outside it. And thus at last we come up against the crucial question—what is the historian's own day?

C

The resemblance between elements of **postpositivist psychoanalytic** thought and that of interwar historical **relativists** is striking. **SPENCE'S** turn to a **relativist** orientation in the wake of his disappointed earlier **scientism** parallels **BEARD'S** odyssey. His distinction between the allegedly unmediated access to **reality** of the natural **scientist** and the **analyst** seeing through a glass darkly recapitulates an invalid distinction common to both **BEARD** and **BECKER**. **SCHAFFER'S** emphasis on the **pragmatic** purposes for which "everyman" constructs a usable history closely follows **BECKER'S** argument. Comparison between **relativism** in history and in **psychoanalysis** was pursued more systematically by other **psychoanalysts** who reexamined **FREUDIAN EPISTEMOLOGY** and practice. Richard **GEHA**, who went farther than any other **analyst** in adopting a "**subjectivist idealist**" position, was inclined to invoke **CROCE** and **COLLINGWOOD**. Edwin **WALLACE**, though disavowing a "naive **Rankean** notion of the facts," took an **objectivist** stance, and generally endorsed the **antirelativist** strictures of **LOVEJOY** and **MANDELBAUM**.

Above all, the resemblance lay in seeking to overthrow the reign of a solely correspondence theory of truth, which had been the bedrock of traditional **epistemology** in both fields, and pressing the claims of its competitors, "**coherence**" and "**pragmatic**" theories. In the traditional view it was assumed that latent **coherence** and **pragmatically** beneficial consequences would naturally follow from an account which "**corresponded**." **SPENCE**, **SCHAFFER**, and their allies within **psychoanalysis**, like the historical **relativists**, argued that no possible single account could exactly **correspond**, and that many possible competing accounts could do so "more or less." In their view, while **correspondence** did not necessarily entail **coherence** or utility, **coherence** and utility required a good deal of **correspondence**, since no account not substantially anchored in **reality** could ever, in practice, be judged **coherent**, practical, or in any other sense "true." In their dethroning of **correspondence** as the all-powerful and sufficient criterion of truth, the dissident **analysts** were pursuing the same agenda as their colleagues in other disciplines. Their positive program paralleled that enunciated by **BECKER** in "Everyman His Own Historian." The pasts men created were "as a whole perhaps neither true nor false, but only the most convenient form of error." Each generation "must inevitably play on the dead whatever tricks it finds necessary for its own peace of mind."

of the paragraph. Now in *BIG C* we hear only a quiet fellow whom we saw twice before but did not hear amid the hubbub of the first paragraph. Carl Becker's voice is quiet, but his enunciation is distinct. It is well that it should have been so since it was offering the master account to which historical relativists in America have for more than sixty years rendered due obeisance.

The differences between *BIG C* on the one hand, *small a* and *small b* on the other, are conspicuous. They may, however, obscure a significant similarity among the three. In their divergent ways, all are about how history is and ought to be written. None of them insist that the writing of history should, must, or can be "objective," or "value-free." It is *within* this similarity that the differences of *small a* and *small b* from *BIG C* and their likeness to each other become conspicuous: *small a* makes his points with consummate grace; consciously or not, *small b* seems to be emulating *a*; when finally he gets to his point, *BIG C* with true modesty steps aside and lets *a* make it for him. For, of course, the author of *small a* is that formidable quiet man, Carl Becker, its source is that classic brief for relativism, "Everyman His Own Historian."⁷ So, no one will fault the taste of the author of *BIG C* for letting *small a* do his work for him: it is better that way.

⁷ Becker, *Everyman*, 240-41.

Meanwhile, one or two readers may have guessed that Professor N. wrote Exhibit C.⁸

But who is the author of *little b*? Surely, he is not a mere clone of the author of *small a*, Carl Becker. Yet between him and Becker there seems to be a sort of genetic affinity. Well, actually, I am the author of *small b*, a page from "The Historian and His Day."⁹ In Professor N.'s reading, however, I am a paradigmatic objectivist—vile creature! A perplexity here? Not really. *Small a* and *small b*, Becker and I, are brothers under the thin skin of ideology. We both chose as our vocation the *writing* of history. Having made that choice, it is safer to conjecture that neither of us could ever have written for publication a page like *BIG C*. It is certain we never did.

It does begin to look enough as if my *small b* ways, so manifestly like those of *small a*, Carl Becker, got me a bit closer to him than the *BIG C* ways of Professor N. got him. In the introduction to *That Noble Dream*, Professor N. laments the price he had to pay for "emphasizing breadth of coverage." The price is that "I am unable to offer rounded and nuanced treatments of the thought of the individuals whom I discuss. I have, of course, attempted to avoid misrepresenting their general postures, or overinterpreting their casual remarks or actions, but I am less likely to have succeeded in this attempt than a scholar who has made an intensive study of one or a few individuals. Scholarship, like all of life, is full of trade-offs."¹⁰

Well, maybe. . . . Still, three years down the road of time, the truism "scholarship is full of trade-offs" may ring a little less true for Professor N. than it did in 1988. When he glances at *BIG C*, Professor N. may wonder whether, in one trade-off he chose, he snookered himself. Anyhow, so much for "Carl Becker, Professor Novick, and Me."

Still, "Cheer Up, Professor N.!" Your last paragraphs dwell ruefully on the uncertainty that must beset any historian as to the worth of his effort. With touching melancholy, you mourn the anarchy in the Israel of professional history. Then you hedge your bet. In 1986 or 1987, chaos reigns at the end of *That Noble Dream*. But, you wondered, would it last forever? It did not; your prudence has paid off handsomely.

Three or four years later; Exhibit *D* (1990); it is a digest of a recent manifesto on the right way to do history in primary and secondary schools. The issue is a proposed history curriculum. Does *D* address the "objectivity problem"? That is hard to say; the term is not present. It does address itself to "standards of accuracy and integrity, the commonly accepted standards of evidence, honest and conscientious scholarship" in historical inquiry, the kind of scholarship of which *That Noble Dream* is an admirable exemplar. And it also expresses a certain naïve enthusiasm for "the Western tradition" of "individual freedom and political democracy." Unwisely perhaps, but with no hedging, and eyes at the time not fixed on the intellectual-chic gauge, I spent the years 1984–1989 as director of a Center for the History of Freedom, and as editor of the first volume of a series,

⁸ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 562–63.

⁹ J. H. Hexter, "The Historian and His Day," in *Reappraisals in History* (London, 1961), 4–5.

¹⁰ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 8–9.

D

The history taught to . . . children must meet the highest standards of accuracy and integrity. We steadfastly oppose the politicization of history, no matter how worthy the motive . . .

In July, 1989, a task force on minorities, appointed by the New York commissioner of education, submitted a report . . . calling for revision of the history curriculum . . .

The report, a polemical document, viewed division into racial groups as the basic analytical framework for an understanding of American history. It showed no understanding of the integrity of history as an intellectual discipline based on commonly accepted standards of evidence. It saw history rather as a form of social and psychological therapy whose function is to raise the self-esteem of children from minority groups.

The Regents endorsed the report and authorized the revision of the history curriculum by a panel of 21 persons. Of this group six to eight are to be scholars distributed among seven fields; the panel might well end up with only one historian. "Care will be taken," the Regents add, "to ensure that among the active participants will be scholars and teachers who represent the ethnic and cultural groups under consideration"—which sounds like an invitation to each group to write, or veto, its own history.

[We] are, we believe, well known for [our] commitment to equal rights and . . . rejection of any form of racism in the schools and in society. We are also united in our belief in a pluralistic interpretation of American history and our support for such shamefully neglected fields as the history of women, of immigration and of minorities.

We have an equal commitment to standards of historical scholarship. We condemn the reduction of history to ethnic cheerleading on the demand of pressure groups. And we reject as unfair and insulting the implicit assumption in the . . . report that minorities are incapable of absorbing a first-class education.

We have a further concern: The commissioner of education's task force contemptuously dismisses the Western tradition. Recognition of its influence on American culture, the task force declares, has a "terribly damaging effect on the psyche" of children from non-European cultures. No evidence is adduced to support this proposition and much evidence argues against it.

The Western tradition is the source of ideas of individual freedom and political democracy to which most of the world now aspires. The West has committed its share of crimes against humanity, but the Western democratic philosophy also contains in its essence the means of exposing crimes and producing reforms. Little can be more damaging to the psyches of young Blacks, Hispanics, Asians and Indians than for the State of New York to tell them that the Western democratic tradition is not for them.

And little can have more damaging effect on the republic than the use of the school system to promote the division of our people into antagonistic racial groups. We are after all a nation—as Walt Whitman said, "a teeming Nation of nations"—and history enables us to understand the bonds of cohesion that make for nationhood and a sense of the common good: *unum e pluribus* . . .

We will insist that the . . . history curriculum reflect honest and conscientious scholarship and accurately portray the forging of this nation from the experiences of many different groups and peoples.

[C]hildren . . . deserve no less than the best.

The Making of Modern Freedom. Freedom is a phenomenon as Occidental in origin as Confucianism is Far Eastern. I expect that volume to attend the AHA meeting next year even if I do not make it.

During the decades of your scholarly labors (1967–1987?), the West and its freedom and democracy were not intellectually chic. Nor was the view that historians were bound to keep their eyes wide open for bias, carelessness, and outright cheating in all the sources they used. That is perhaps the view of those

naïve, deluded fogies from thirty-six to eighty-eight years of age who signed off on Exhibit *D*.¹¹ It is certainly mine. And, in practice, it is palpably yours.

Taken all in all, a question arises about the historiographic turbulence that so impressed you, Professor N., in about 1987. Is it more than a generational propensity to world-historical *mal de mer*? Perhaps the fogies committed to Exhibit *D* might not find your argument here and now entirely compelling. Nor indeed do I.

Your scriptural tag, "Every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25), is apt—relatively, that is. It neatly applies to the Israelite tribes in the Middle East bashing the Benjamites in the twelfth century B.C. Does it fit professional historians in America in 1990? You tell us all these historians have long been stumbling in the dark. Really? Take courage, my colleagues. "Westward, look, the land is bright." And, if you can, cheer up Professor N.!

¹¹ Diane Ravitch and Arthur Schlesinger, "Remaking New York's History Curriculum," *New York Times*, August 12, 1990.