Postmodernist Theory and Wissenschaftliche Practice

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One of the best passages in Peter Novick’s marvelously written book expresses Novick’s understanding of his subject. “I spend a good deal of time talking about what historians do worst, or at least badly: reflecting on epistemology . . . [It is] something like a sportswriter reporting on [historians’] performances in the annual history department softball game.”1 As concerns the intellectual history of the “objectivity question,” this is exactly right. Novick has written a history of the theoretical discourse of a community of non-theorists. A study of donut holes? No; far from it.

The theoretical discourse of our community of non-theorists is eminently worth studying. From it, we learn a great deal concerning the professional culture of academic historians in the United States and about the terms on which historians have participated in, and/or resisted, the successive enthusiasms and preoccupations of American academic intellectuals generally. Hence That Noble Dream is a strikingly successful contribution to the field of American academic history. Novick tells us more about the philosophical presuppositions, ideological predilections, social biases, and professional norms of the discipline he studies than does any work known to me addressed to any one of the major social scientific and humanistic disciplines practiced in the United States during the same time frame.

Although Novick is sometimes criticized for not defining the “objectivity question” more sharply, and for not organizing his book more rigorously around debates concerning this question, I believe the book is all the more valuable because Novick has construed this question so broadly as to enable him to follow his own instinct for what is interesting about the development of the profession. That Noble Dream is even more useful considered as a social and political history of the profession than it is considered as an intellectual history of the profession’s discourse about objectivity.

Novick has given us a much-needed critical introduction not to the historian’s craft, not to the philosophy of history, but to the standing lore of the profession. It is ideal reading for new recruits as they enter graduate school. I have assigned it in three different seminars of beginning graduate students and find that the book generates an appropriate mixture of gasps of horror and of self-recognition.

It also generates some of the most probing and animated seminar discussions it has been my privilege to lead in twenty years of graduate teaching.

Some of what Novick says about the development of our professional culture invites challenge, but for the most part his account is convincingly documented, in an old-fashioned, *wissenschaftliche* way. Stories that used to be handed down from generation to generation in the faculty lounge and at semester-end parties for graduate students are now the stuff of footnotes based on multi-archival research: Novick has gone to the archives to find out if John D. Hicks really did express alarm at Armin Rappaport's possible appointment at Berkeley on account of Rappaport's being Jewish and from New York, and hence a left-winger. So it is with hundreds of items of what used to be gossip, as well as with many hundreds more that were never even matters of gossip but have been discovered afresh by Novick in the course of his research. *That Noble Dream* is a suitable primer for recruits to the profession not only on account of its subject matter but also on account of its indefatigable devotion to some of our standard professional ideals, including empirical verification and a generous measure of critical detachment. Novick's achievement, then, is of a fairly traditional sort and was suitably recognized by our Association a year ago through the awarding to Novick of the Beveridge Prize.

The limits of Novick's achievement come into view, however, when we attempt to use his book to help us figure out just where the "objectivity question" is today, or should be. It is hard for me to take seriously Novick's claim that the "discipline of history" had "ceased to exist" by the 1980s and that "convergence on anything, let alone a subject as highly charged as 'the objectivity question,' was out of the question." I do not think the profession finds "the objectivity question" so highly charged. Given a little provocation, we seem ready to drop whatever else we may be doing to run to New York to argue about objectivity. Indeed, the publication of Novick's own book seems to have created within the historical profession a discourse about "objectivity" of just the sort that Novick says had become impossible. Witness the probing and thoughtful essay-reviews by James Kloppenberg in the *AHR*, by Thomas Haskell in *History & Theory*, and by Kenneth Cmiel in *American Literary History*.

If, during the decade prior to the provocation of Novick's book, historians had not been saying much about the objectivity question, perhaps this relative silence derives not from this question's being too hot to handle, as Novick suggests, but from the fact that this question has left a lot of folks rather cold. So many other issues within the research programs of our own specialized fields of historical scholarship have seemed a lot hotter, and more engaging. I am intrigued by Alan Brinkley's observation that objectivity "seems to be one of the few things about which something like a consensus appears to have emerged within the historical

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profession."⁴ I suspect Brinkley exaggerates the extent of agreement, but Brinkley is surely right to insist that historians have found other questions more engaging.

Among the historians who have found other questions more engaging is Peter Novick himself. Novick makes clear in his early pages that his book makes no argument on the "objectivity question" as such, offers no answer to it: "this isn't that sort of book," Novick says candidly and honestly.⁵ Yet, toward the end of the book, Novick acts as though he had made such an argument, and triumphantly. The voice he adopts in the final chapter, "There Was No King in Israel," is a more sweeping, less patient voice than he has used in the earlier chapters. He leaves the impression that the ideal of objectivity, even in its most hermeneutically self-conscious reformulations, has been decisively refuted and what is needed is simply the Nietzschean courage to face a relativist abyss. Thomas Haskell and I get depicted in the last few pages as well-meaning liberal saps, nice fellows who just happen to be utterly oblivious to how anachronistic our ideas have become. It almost seems that Haskell and I are to the myth of objectivity what Haldeman and Ehrlichman were to the Nixon White House, two guys haplessly trying to "save the plan" while our world crumbles.⁶

Although I am tempted to use this occasion as an opportunity to explain why I believe this shoe does not fit, and why the attendant vision of our current historiographical situation is misleading, I am resisting this temptation for two reasons. First, many of the points I would make have already been made in the reviews published by Kloppenberg, Haskell, and Cmiel. Second, I am eager to shift the discussion of That Noble Dream away from the contemporary theoretical issues about which Novick has little to offer us and toward the historical issues about which Novick has so very much to offer. If we want help in formulating and addressing theoretical issues, there are plenty of professional colleagues who can help us more than Novick can. We can look, for example, to Frank Ankersmit, to Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., to Leon J. Goldstein, to Martin Jay, to Dominick LaCapra, to Allan Megill, to John Toews, and to a number of others who write about these issues in History & Theory and elsewhere.⁷

By way of trying to advance this shift, I want to present two lists of representative questions, one consisting of questions concerning which I believe Novick helps us little even though his book is sometimes taken to include answers to these questions, and a second consisting of questions concerning which Novick has a lot to say deserving of more critical scrutiny than we have been giving it.

⁵ Novick, That Noble Dream, 6.
So, first, a representative list of questions concerning which we should look elsewhere, beyond Novick: Did Carl Becker really say it all? In just what sense of the word, if any, is “objectivity” still a valid ideal for historians? Is history a type of fiction? How do the books and articles produced by historians compare in epistemological status to the artifacts in which novelists, literary critics, sociologists, geologists, and physicists present the results of their work?

Turning to my other list, a list representing questions concerning which Novick does have important things to say, deserving of our appreciation and our critical scrutiny: When the ideal of “objectivity” has been invoked by certain historians at certain times and places, what did they mean by it? How can we explain the ups and downs of certain components of the “myth of objectivity” in terms of the political, ethno-demographic, and economic conditions that have impinged on the historical profession of the United States? How have these same political, ethno-demographic, and economic conditions influenced the behavior of historians toward one another, irrespective of the “objectivity question”? How has the vocation of history—and the profession organized to promote and protect that vocation—been understood by those historians with responsibility for running the major institutions of the profession, i.e., the associations, the journals, and the academic departments? What happened to the historical profession in the 1960s? How did Richard Hofstadter handle Mark Naison’s Ph.D. oral? Do historians who are Jewish have a more sympathetic “take” on African-American history than do historians who are Anglo-Saxon Protestants? Why is Wallace Notestein not acknowledged in the preface of J. H. Hexter’s *Reign of King Pym*?

It would be easy to extend this second list, which I take to illustrate not so much issues about which Novick is obviously correct in every detail, but issues, small and large, about which Novick has something serious and interesting to say.

I would, however, be happy to hear Novick address more directly than he has so far just what he takes to be the relationship between these two kinds of questions. He tells us that he has been more persuaded by the critics of the objectivity myth than by its defenders, yet he has written a book ideally suited to please the latter. This is a very traditional monograph attentive in the extreme to standard professional norms. There may not be a paradox here, but if there is not, it would be good to have explained more fully why there is not. If an “argument” can possess “relative autonomy . . . from details of the evidence” as Novick tells us was true in the case of David Abraham’s much-debated study of Weimar industrialists and Nazism, why does Novick work so hard to document his own claims, rendering them less vulnerable to attack than were the claims of David Abraham? Does Novick’s *wissenschaftliche* practice imply that doubts about the objectivity myth need produce no changes whatsoever in the way we do history? If the concept of objectivity is, as Novick tells us, “essentially confused,” so what?

The closest thing to a response to this question I can find in *That Noble Dream* is Novick’s characterization of the opening lines of the Declaration of Indepen-

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dence as "salutary nonsense." The ideals set forth in the Declaration of Independence are as confused and incoherent, it seems, as are the traditional ideals of historians, but Novick professes to appreciate the role of natural rights concepts "as bulwarks of liberty and equality." Yet in the next paragraph Novick quotes Isaiah Berlin's formulation of the Hegelian insight that even "great liberating ideas" turn "inevitably" into "suffocating straightjackets."[1] Who is in the strait jacket? Those Americans who still believe in human rights? Those historians who still try to persuade their colleagues on the basis of empirical evidence and logical reasoning? Novick himself?

Although I will be glad if Novick can tell us more about what he takes to be the relation between his practice and his theory, I want to underscore my earlier emphasis on the success of that practice. In concluding with this appreciation for Novick's achievement, I suppose I am confirming one facet of Novick's characterization of me in the final pages of That Noble Dream: there, he describes me as someone given to "accentuating the positive."[2] When it comes to talking about That Noble Dream, I propose to continue doing just that.