Fragmentation and the Future of Historiography

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**AHR Forum**

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My aim is to point out some broad, and I think little-pondered, implications of the account of the American historical profession that Peter Novick offers in *That Noble Dream*. In particular, I propose to focus on the fourth and final part of the book, entitled “Objectivity in Crisis.” There are four chapters in Part IV, bearing the following descriptive titles: “The Collapse of Comity”; “Every Group Its Own Historian”; “The Center Does Not Hold”; and “There Was No King in Israel.”

Most professional historians, in reading these headings and the accounts to which they apply, will be inclined to see Novick as portraying a situation that is primarily negative in its implications. For example, in a long review of *That Noble Dream*, James Kloppenberg asserted that “[i]n 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.’”¹ In a draft response to Kloppenberg that Novick sent to me in February 1990, after I wrote to him asking for a list of the most recent reviews of his book, Novick conceded that in quoting Judges 21:25 he had committed a “serious rhetorical gaffe,” for his actual assessment of the situation in professional historiography was not “apocalyptic,” nor did he mean to suggest that contemporary professional historiography was in a state of “individualistic anarchy.”² In fact, while “there was no king in Israel” characterizes quite well the state of our discipline, “every man did that which was right in his own eyes” does not. A careful reading of Novick’s book does not suggest that he has an apocalyptic view of the current fragmented state of historiography, nor does it suggest that he “laments” that state. If anything, the lament is Kloppenberg’s; it is not Novick’s.

I find that I am profoundly suspicious of attempts to overcome the fragmentation, of attempts to restore (at some higher or more sophisticated level) the synthesis. Belief in the virtue of synthesis and in the badness of fragmentation seems deeply ingrained within our academic culture and within the culture of professional historians in particular. Every few years, we find proposals being advanced for some new synthesis or other.³ Let us be warned, however: all calls


² Novick returns to the point in “My Correct Views on Everything,” *AHR*, 96 (June 1991): 702.

³ The most recent proposal to be widely noticed in the profession is offered by Thomas Bender, “Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History,” *Journal of American History*, 73
for synthesis are attempts to impose an interpretation. It is fair enough to argue for a particular interpretation as an interpretation. But it will not do to present a particular interpretation as the synthesizing magic thread. I find no justification—certainly no articulated justification—for taking "fragmentation" as a dispraising term and "synthesis" as a praising one. We can hope to attain clarity of mind on such issues only if we take these terms as neutral.

Such is the power of academic professionalism that even in those fields that have contributed most to the fragmentation, lip service continues to be paid to the ideal of unity. For example, in a review of five recent articles in women's history, part of a very interesting AHR forum, Kathryn Kish Sklar points to the "notable assets" that have come with the growth of women's history and then observes that "we must nevertheless recognize that our current situation contains all the liabilities associated with rapid growth, especially inadequate integration." But is "inadequate integration" a liability, as long as insight is advanced in other ways? It is not surprising to find that Sklar follows this observation with a plea for her own "paradigm" for understanding women's movements in different countries. Sklar's way of explaining the emergence and development of women's movements may have many virtues; it may indeed "integrate" our understanding of those movements. But it would be a mistake to take the possible future success of Sklar's integration as reflecting negatively on those accounts of women's movements that the integration fails to accommodate. Other historians may be preoccupied by other issues. Accordingly, the questions to ask of their work are: How interesting are these issues? How well are they addressed? Judgment of quality would come from the answers to these critical questions, not from whether the works conform to Sklar's or anyone else's "paradigm."

In the same symposium, Daniel Walkowitz suggests in an article on social workers in the 1920s that "[t]o tell the full story of twentieth-century social workers' search for identity, historians need to draw on the literatures of consumption, work, and professionalization, for the development of social work..."
as a profession was shaped by cultural conventions and limited by the material realities of the home and the workplace."6 Walkowitz identifies elements that historians would certainly want to find in an account of "social workers' search for identity." But what justifies the claim that these elements would lead us to "the full story" of that search? The justification, I suggest, lies deeply embedded in the professional identity of historians. Walkowitz's use of the phrase "the full story" is almost certainly offhanded, but the offhandedness makes his use of it all the more significant, all the more a marker of a widely shared historians' bias.

The bias, it seems to me, is currently under challenge. Novick's remarkable book is one of the elements in that challenge, for in his wide-ranging, ironic, dispassionate—indeed, in several senses of the term, objective—account of the American historical profession, he calls into question precisely those notions of objectivity that lie hidden in the idea that there is a "full story."

The most sophisticated observers of the historiographical scene understand well enough the contingency of those faiths that hold professional historiography together. With contingency comes the alleged threat of fragmentation. The sophisticated response to the alleged threat is the pragmatic, Peircean appeal to "communities of the competent."7 But this will not do. There is a disciplinary blindness that prevails within the modernist academy, and not only among historians. This is the blindness of historians who argue only with other historians, philosophers only with other philosophers, economists only with other economists, and so on. When one's universe of argument is restricted in this way—and the disciplinary structure of the modernist university certainly encourages such restriction—it is easy to imagine that one knows what competence is.

But there is no single competence. An argument deemed acceptable by the consensus of competent historians may well be deemed unacceptable by the consensus of competent philosophers or economists—and vice versa. Many historians have in fact never entered into serious argumentative relation with economists or philosophers or literary theorists or rhetoricians, for such relations are not in general given professional reward. Hence they do not know how multifarious is competence. That the "community of the competent" argument has been taken seriously is one marker of the firmness of disciplinary divisions within our institutions of higher learning.8 Novick's account of raging controver-

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8 Less I be misunderstood, I am not arguing for interdisciplinary unification. The more that one knows, through the experience of having argued with them, about how the practitioners of other disciplines argue, the less likely one is to think that the different modes of argument are compatible enough for any one person to practice them at the same time. Thus I am deeply suspicious of notions of convergence between different disciplines.
sies among historians, and of the now-discarded assumptions of earlier generations of historians, needs to be set within this wider socio-intellectual context.

And yet, professional identity has been important for the development of historical knowledge. As one part of his very large story, Novick shows that the repudiation in the post–World War II period of the relativist critique of objectivity offered by Charles Beard and Carl Becker in the 1930s was closely connected with the conception of history as “an autonomous profession.”9 “Autonomy,” like “synthesis,” is another of those words to which most professional historians, without articulated justification, attribute positive value. Thus when Novick observes that for most women’s historians, “the feminist community was at least as salient a reference group as was the profession,”10 he is likely to be read as saying something bad about women’s history. But such a reading of Novick seems to me to be quite wrong. Novick does not approve of “autonomy,” nor does he disapprove of it. On the contrary, here and elsewhere he seems to me to be determinedly neutral on the matter. If he is not neutral, he ought to be; for nothing in That Noble Dream supports the granting of positive value to autonomy—or negative value, either.

A story will perhaps help to link together these issues of synthesis and autonomy. The story is an encapsulated history of the enterprise of professional historiography. It is not the only story that can encapsulate that history, but it is, I think, an important one. In its broad outlines, my story goes, the history of professional historiography is closely connected to differing attitudes toward what we might call “the project of grand narrative.” By “grand narrative,” I mean the story that the world would tell if the world itself could tell its story.11

“In the beginning”—I mean, of course, in that benighted time before professional historiography existed—European intellectuals believed that there existed a grand narrative and that it was possible to tell that narrative now. More precisely, it was possible to retell the narrative, for the narrative in question was the story offered in Judaeo-Christian Scripture. Professional historians, with their commitment to finding the narrative, were unnecessary.

Somewhat later than the beginning, faith in the scriptural grand narrative diminished. Professional historians began to walk the earth. In the early phase of professional historiography, the dominant view was that there exists a grand narrative but that it cannot be told now: it can only be told in the future, after “further research” has been done. Such was Ranke’s view—at least most of the time. As the late Leonard Krieger pointed out, this view kept Ranke’s well-known concern with historical individualities anchored within the larger framework of universal history.12 It was Lord Acton’s view and J. B. Bury’s as well. It was also, I suggest, the view of that vast majority of historians who never reflected on

9 Novick, That Noble Dream, 361–411.
10 Novick, That Noble Dream, 496.
11 I borrow the term “grand narrative” from Jean-François Lyotard, although the definition offered here is my own. See Jean-François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, foreword by Fredric Jameson (Minneapolis, Minn., 1979; originally published in French in 1979), xxiii–xxiv and passim.
universal history but nonetheless wrote out of a fundamental faith in the validity of Western culture as they understood it.

In a later phase of professional historiography, after World War I, there was yet another change. Now historians became more distanced in their commitment to grand narrative. They continued to believe that there exists a grand narrative, but it was a peculiar grand narrative—a purely ideal narrative, a narrative that could never actually be told. Under this dispensation, “autonomy” and “synthesis” remained important values—positive terms in the professional historian’s lexicon, but no particular synthesis could ever win the approval of any more than a fraction of the profession.

Today, I would suggest, there are signs of a fourth phase or attitude. Novick’s book both describes the preconditions for a new attitude and, in part, exemplifies it. Whether that attitude comes to full blossom remains to be seen. In the fourth, “post-professional” phase, the dominant view would reject grand narrative entirely—but ironically (for an unironic rejection of grand narrative would end up reconstituting it in its pre-professional form). I imagine, here, historians who would no longer see terms like “synthesis” and “autonomy” as possessing positive value (but such terms would also not possess negative value). I imagine historians who would not in any way think that they were telling “the full story.” I imagine historians who could turn themselves into economists or philosophers or literary critics, and who could shift easily back and forth between such conflicting fields (for conflicting they most certainly are). I imagine historians who, at the same time, would be intellectuals, speaking within the field of historiography and outside it as well.

As someone who has seen, in more than one context, the erosion of previously unquestioned consensus, I find fragmentation to be in some ways profoundly disturbing. Yet, if the sociological transformation of the academy continues (and I am inclined to think that it will), consensus of the old sort will have a hard time surviving. In such a situation, unity on the substantive level—the unity provided by the telling of a single story—can only serve to exclude. Likewise, when disciplines become fragmented and when the cross-cuts between them begin to take on lives of their own, unity on the methodological level disappears. Perhaps the only way, finally, of holding together what once was seen (somewhat misleadingly) as a unified enterprise would be through sustained attention to the histories, sociologies, and rhetorics of historical study—that is, through examining precisely the diversities that have shadowed historiography from the beginning. In short, unity would come only at a reflective level—if it would come at all.

In the fourth phase, works like Novick’s, which fall within the hitherto professionally despised field of historiography or “historiology,” would assume an important integrative role. One can think, too, of other works of a similar kind, by such writers as R. G. Collingwood, Hayden White, Paul Veyne, and Louis Mink, which all offer a reflective glance at the historians’ project.¹³ Yet consider the

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character of the integration—for historians generally would be united only by a common recognition of the impossibility of their union (although historians specifically might be temporarily united in more substantive ways). The deep teaching of Novick's wise and learned book, it seems to me, is that integration, either substantive or methodological, is impossible, except by force or by forgetfulness, and in consequence is not to be desired.