AHR Forum
My Correct Views on Everything

PETER NOVICK

There is nothing more tedious than the spectacle of disgruntled authors complaining that they have been misrepresented or, even worse, whimpering that they have been "misunderstood." Academic authors, above all others, should be immunized from such concerns, after years of seeing the versions of our lectures we get back in blue books at the end of the term. Nevertheless, it seems to me worthwhile to take up a few misreadings, by the panelists and others, of what I wrote in That Noble Dream, since these misreadings can skew our understanding of "the objectivity question and the future of the historical profession."

Linda Gordon repeatedly talks of my book as being organized around a "dichotomy" or "binary opposition" between two "positions": objectivism and relativism. From the way she talks about relativism, it is clear that she thinks I wrote about—more important, that she believes there in fact is—some kind of relativist methodological approach, which I was describing (or perhaps promoting).

I'm not sure what Gordon means by historical relativism, but I know how I used the word in the book that is our point of departure. At the very beginning of That Noble Dream, I noted in passing that "relativism" and "relativist" were labels applied by defenders of the idea of objectivity to their critics—not self-designations—but that the labels stuck, and so I used them. "Relativism," I wrote, "refers not to a positive position but rather to a critical stance vis-à-vis various elements in the objectivist synthesis, and, in general, doubts about the coherence of the notion of objectivity as applied to history." I subsequently repeated this understanding of historical relativism on other occasions, and it informs the entire book.1

To the best of my knowledge, no American professional historian has ever advanced "relativism" as a doctrine, or as a method, or as anything other than a repudiation of the objectivist telos. Just as in matters religious, nonbelievers feel that they can get along without "god," so we who are called relativists believe we can get along without "objectivity." But just as fundamentalists construct the bogeyman of "secular humanism" as the alleged doctrine of nonbelievers, so we have the reification—and Gordon is by no means the worst offender here—of the "posture" or "doctrine" of relativism. Those of us who, like myself, get labeled as

I have borrowed (i.e., stolen) my title from Leszek Kolakowski, who once used it in a response to E. P. Thompson. I've always loved it, wanted to use it, and may never have another chance.

extreme relativists share no doctrine. We have in common only the conviction that, as I wrote in my book, “to say of a work of history that it is or isn’t objective is to make an empty observation; to say something neither interesting nor useful.”

I have sometimes used the term “anti-objectivist” to describe so-called relativists, but that was, I think, a mistake. Although the term “a-objectivist” is clumsy and difficult to pronounce, it would, I think, be more accurate, by analogy with “amoralists” and “asexuals” who aren’t against morality or sexuality—just don’t think it very interesting, important, or relevant to their lives. (These are not, perhaps, the happiest examples, but the point is a purely formal, etymological one.)

Not just in principle but, with trivial exceptions, in practice, the historical scholarship that so-called relativists write is indistinguishable from that of their brothers and sisters who, in some sense or other, continue to “strive for objectivity.” If two historians, one a “nihilist” relativist and the other a dyed-in-the-wool objectivist, set out to produce a history of the Civil War, or a biography of George Washington, there is nothing about their “relativism” or “objectivism” per se that would lead them to do their research differently, frame their narrative or analysis differently, or, indeed, prevent their writing identical accounts.

What, then, is the “objectivity question” all about, since my critics and I don’t just disagree about the answer but about the question? I laid out my understanding of the question—in retrospect, perhaps not as forcefully as I might have—on the first and last pages of the introduction and repeated it in the very last paragraph of the book. (And, of course, the 600 plus pages in between were all based on this understanding.) The “objectivity question,” I wrote, has to do with “what professional historians are up to—what they think they are doing; or ought to be doing, when they write history”; with “the nature of our work . . . ways of thinking about the products we present . . . and the claims we make on behalf of those products.” From the readers’ point of view, it’s a question of the sort of object they hold in their hands when they pick up a work of history. From the author’s standpoint, it’s a question of what sort of object is being placed in the mailbox when the manuscript is sent off.

To put it somewhat differently, the “objectivity question” is in no sense a methodological question, as Gordon and others would have it. It is only very ambiguously an epistemological question (which my dictionary defines as “pertaining to . . . the method or grounds of knowledge”). Rather, though I realize that the categories aren’t straightforward, it seems to me fundamentally an ontological question (having to do with, according to the same dictionary, “the being or essence of things”). The “things” in this case are both historical scholarship and the fruits of that scholarship. This is why the question is so highly charged: it goes not to the (methodological) issue of how we do our work but to who we are, what we’re doing, and what we’ve done when we’ve done it.

David Hollinger purports to see in my book an internal contradiction between “Postmodernist Theory and Wissenschaftliche Practice.” (Hollinger rips off the mask and reveals himself to be a deconstructionist.) Toward the end of his piece,

---

Hollinger specifies his dilemma. Even though I reject the objectivist myth, he says, I have written a book ideally suited to please those who defend the myth. (A bit of an overstatement—cf., e.g., Professor Hexter.) In what is a left-handed compliment if I ever saw one, Hollinger calls the book "a very traditional monograph" that is "attentive in the extreme to standard professional norms." He goes on: "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 [of David Abraham's book], why does Novick work so hard to document his own claims, rendering them less vulnerable to attack than were the claims of David Abraham?"4

Very much to the point here are some remarks by the philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend. And they are even more to the point if one reads what Feyerabend had to say about arguments as applying to mode of presentation as well. Feyerabend wrote: "An important rule of argumentation is that an argument does not reveal the 'true beliefs' of its author. An argument is not a confession, it is an instrument designed to make an opponent change his mind. The existence of arguments of a certain type in a book may permit the reader to infer what the author regards as effective persuasion, it does not permit him to infer what the author thinks is true."5

I do indeed believe that an argument can possess "relative autonomy . . . from details of the evidence." But most of my readers don't share this belief—are in fact suspicious of any such claim. How do I win over those who can be won over and make difficulties for those who, if they could conveniently do so, would like to discredit my findings and conclusions by disparaging my scholarship? The question answers itself: by the most scrupulous adherence to wissenschaftliche (sometimes confused with "objectivist") norms. If I were addressing a French audience, I'd speak French—and pay particular attention to my pronunciation, because you lose credibility with the French if you mangle their language. If, as the result of some revolution in historiographical sensibilities, the discipline demanded that findings be presented in sonnet form, I'd chop up what I had to say into fourteen-line chunks. Addressing the existing historical profession, which has its privileged idiom, its rules about what makes you gain credibility and what makes you lose it, its fetishized procedures and modes of discourse, I do those things that gain me credibility and avoid those things that would make me less believable and more vulnerable—that would embarrass and tend to discredit me. Those whose views are safely middle-of-the-road can risk carelessness; those of us

5 Paul K. Feyerabend, Science in a Free Society (London, 1978), 156, italics in original. All of this is, of course, also relevant to Hollinger's astonishing assertion—and not his alone—that my book presents no "argument." Only those who have a very narrow (sylogistic) view of argumentation could say this. The entire book is an argument, which, by redescribing the objectivity question, attempts to get people to look at the question differently and perhaps, in the process, come to abandon what seem to me outdated shibboleths. I may have failed in this attempt, as I manifestly did with Hollinger, but that's another matter. In any case, there are limits for what you can hope for in the case of a Haideman or an Ehlichman—a marvelous analogy, for which I am grateful to Hollinger, and which I wish I'd thought of when I was writing the book.
whose work in one way or another challenges conventional wisdom can't afford to, since what we write is bound to be scrutinized with more than ordinary care.

Let me now turn to a bit of scriptural exegesis, the scriptural text in question being, of course, “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes.” I should here apologize for somewhat imprecise imagery. The verse suggests a state of “individualistic” anarchy, while in fact, as I made clear at great length in the last section of the book, what we have today in the American historical profession is something akin to the Holy Roman Empire: not-quite-sovereign but largely autonomous realms, with various systems of adjudication and of measurement, in ever-shifting alliances, ever amalgamating and bifurcating, linked by a progressively weakening allegiance to dimly remembered common values and ideals. Hardly anyone noticed the ultimate disappearance of the Holy Roman Empire, and only a handful of sentimental conservatives regretted its demise. All the worthwhile activities that men and women had conducted under the empire (and some not-so-worthwhile ones as well) were equally possible after this vestigial allegiance had disappeared. This qualification aside, I am flabbergasted that my characterization of the fragmented state of the discipline is regarded as “apocalyptic” by Hollinger and other critics. Of the panelists, Allan Megill alone sees that I in no way lament the state of affairs I described; that, like him, I see it instead as offering rich possibilities.

The widespread misreading of what I had to say on this matter illustrates the deplorable decay of scriptural literacy in this secular age. The verse describes a state of affairs not at “the end of days” but quite early in biblical history. Soon thereafter, the people of Israel told the prophet Samuel that they wanted “a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.” God instructed Samuel to “warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will do” (1 Samuel 8). The prophet warned them of the disasters that would follow; they wanted a king anyway; they got one, and the disasters followed in short order.

So long as we have no king—no coerced orthodoxy—I see no reason why we cannot peacefully coexist. If views differ on the ontology of historiography, everyday historical practice can continue undisturbed. Those who think as I do are content, in our historical work, to be suggestive, and we don’t worry about being definitive. We want to offer what we hope will be fruitful—perhaps even “edifying”—new ways of looking at things in the past, without aspiring to any higher office. Others are, in a sense that seems to me deluded, but not pernicious, concerned with “moving toward the truth” or “getting it right.” My friends and I can find the work of historians in the latter group suggestive and/or fruitful and/or edifying, while disregarding the far-reaching and, to us, irrelevant claims that are made for them. Conceivably, those in the other camp may conclude that we nihilists have sometimes—against our will, as it were—“moved toward the truth” or “gotten it right.”

Gordon and some others who (like myself) think of themselves as being “on the left” find my plea for tolerant pluralism unsatisfactory. I am told that struggles within the academy are about politics and power; that by not focusing on these struggles, I am evading the main issue. Relations of power within the historical profession, as within all academic disciplines and institutions, are all too real. It is
precisely my awareness of configurations of power that convinces me that any call for a power struggle within the profession would be catastrophic for the left—however “left” is defined. I like to believe that even in a period of left ascendancy I would favor tolerant pluralism: it seems to me a value in its own right. But this principled resolve is unlikely to be tested in what gives every indication of being a very prolonged period of conservative dominion in American society and politics. We are beginning to see very serious conservative backlash in the academy—massively funded by right-wing foundations, cheered on by the mass media, and with increasing support from middle-of-the-road academics who will tolerate the occasional Marxist or feminist but who draw the line at those who would “undermine the foundations of Western rationality.”

With a few well-placed and highly paid exceptions, the target of this onslaught, the historical left—especially the epistemological left—is weak and vulnerable, contrary to its own grandiose claims and the fevered fantasies of paranoid conservatives. In this power-political context, for dissidents of any kind to overreach themselves, and thus compromise that tolerant pluralism which (albeit imperfectly) provides a haven and base for heretics, seems to me *plus qu’un crime—une erreur*.

With all of its faults, the organized American historical profession, particularly in recent decades, has been the most ideologically open, the least exclusionary, of any such body in the world. And, within the American academic world, it continues to compare favorably in this respect to most other disciplines. It is when there is a king in Israel that I’ll be in need of Hexter’s advice to “cheer up.” Until then, concerning the historical profession if very little else, I’m quite cheerful enough.