



Afterword

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AHR Forum
Afterword

DOROTHY ROSS

IN ORGANIZING THIS PANEL, I hoped that the participants would address the clouded future that Peter Novick leaves to the historical profession at the end of his book. New developments in philosophy, science, and the humanities, he said, have destroyed whatever credibility the ideal of objectivity once had. If knowledge is inevitably perspectival and uncertain, historians can only look to their linguistic and social practices to achieve intellectual authority and coherence in their work. Yet, just at this moment, the communal basis of those practices is disintegrating and the profession itself fragmenting. Attempts to find theoretical grounding for a more circumspect ideal of objectivity were not of much use, Novick implied, and, in any case, powerless to stop the centrifugal historical forces at work. Is Novick's a sound reading of our current situation? Whether or not he was lamenting such an outcome, should we?

The lively, overflowing audience that crowded into our room at the Annual Meeting suggests that these concerns are widely shared. At the risk of adding still another reading of our dilemma, let me suggest some points of agreement and disagreement among the panelists. There are two sets of issues involved in the discussion: first, what inferences should we draw from the theoretical critique of objectivity? Second, is the historical profession fragmenting, and how does that situation bear on the objectivity question?

J. H. Hexter is the only one among us who is willing simply to by-pass the philosophical critique of objectivity. He has long believed that it is irrelevant to writing good history. He bids us look closely not at Carl Becker the skeptic but at Becker the historical craftsman. We need only rely on the standards of craftsmanship, of good writing and "getting it right," which are taught and enforced by our scholarly community.¹

The rest of us conclude that the philosophical issue cannot be so easily avoided and that the traditional ideal of objectivity is no longer credible. I *believe* that we accept Allan Megill's conclusion that neither singly nor together, now or in the future, in practice or ideal, can historians tell "the whole story." In different ways, however, Linda Gordon and David Hollinger suggest that it will be possible to

I want to thank Joan Williams for comments that helped to clarify my ideas—to the extent that they are clarified—on a number of key points.

¹ See J. H. Hexter, "The Historian and His Society: A Sociological Inquiry—Perhaps," in *Doing History* (Bloomington, Ind., 1971), esp. 96–97.

substitute for "the whole story" a lesser kind of "objectivity." Gordon proposes we will find it by looking at what historians do rather than at what they say they do. I like her nice evocation of the experience of historical research with its quiet listening to voices from the past, but I do not think that experience yields something that can be called "objectivity" as opposed to "interpretation." What she describes seems to me rather one stage *within* the hermeneutic process.

David Hollinger aligns himself with the effort to construct "hermeneutically self-conscious" redefinitions of the ideal of objectivity, specifically, redefinitions based on "communities of the competent" such as those proposed by Thomas Haskell and James T. Kloppenberg. Allan Megill is doubtful of this effort, and Peter Novick now unequivocally aligns himself with Megill. To understand the disagreement, we need to look more closely at the kind of redefinitions of objectivity Haskell and Kloppenberg have proposed.

Haskell offers a fine analysis of objectivity as impartiality, the willingness to take opponents' arguments seriously into account, an analysis that allows both objectivity and political commitment.² Kloppenberg describes a process of confirmation/falsification of competing interpretations by reference to "hard data," a problematic description but one that nonetheless tries to capture the fact that, for historians, evidence matters.³ Hollinger points to similar professional norms when he praises Novick's book for "a generous measure of critical detachment" and "empirical verification." Indeed, Megill, too, in praising Novick for his "wide-ranging, ironic, dispassionate" account, accepts such limited meanings of objectivity. What then is the disagreement?

I think it is a difference of strategy and emphasis. Why do historians want to reformulate ideas of "objectivity"? My guess is they want to retain the connotations of the term that allow them to differentiate history from fiction—as in Gordon's and Kloppenberg's (different) emphases on evidence. Or that allow them to differentiate historiography from merely subjective opinion—as in Haskell and Hollinger's "critical detachment." Or that allow them to legitimate the particular kind of contextual and genetic analysis that historians do but that social scientists and literary critics do not do. These are, however, three different tasks. The old idea of objectivity as the whole story performed all three functions, but now we are better off addressing these tasks afresh. The term "objectivity" may be a liability rather than an asset in carrying them out.

One thing that redefinitions of historical objectivity based on intellectual communities cannot do, Megill wants to emphasize, is render historiography immune from the deeper forces of historical contingency at work in the profession. If knowledge is inescapably perspectival, all our questions, methods,

² Thomas L. Haskell, "Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Rhetoric vs. Practice in Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream*," *History & Theory*, 29 (1990): esp. 129–36.

³ James T. Kloppenberg, "Objectivity and Historicism: A Century of American Historical Writing," *AHR*, 94 (October 1989): 1011–30. Given the fact that the Deweyan and Popperian language of verification and falsification by reference to facts is inadequate to explain the acceptance or rejection of paradigms in the natural sciences, it has to be much less adequate to explain the acceptance or rejection of historical interpretations, which are even more loosely tied to data and more deeply embedded in the changing configurations of history. Such terms do not seem to me to clarify the part evidence does play in the process and lend a specious aura of scientific certitude. See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d edn. (Chicago, 1970), chap. 12.

and standards of competence inescapably flow with the tides of history. I agree that only if we stand at the "center" of the profession do things look intact. "Fragmentation" is probably the wrong word to describe what is happening, because the multiplying perspectives often retain some links to each other. Fragmentation implies the breakup of a common core into particularist pieces, whereas the outcome is just as likely to be continuing, if shifting, affiliations around a distinctively historical practice.

Nonetheless, there are deep methodological divisions that have already opened in the profession and spawned partially independent communities. Novick's book was not awarded the prize of the Social Science History Association or of the American Studies Association. Critical perspectives from many quarters have called into question basic categories and values in our historiography. Indeed, it is in dealing with feminist and minority history that Novick's impartiality noticeably falters, as Gordon makes clear. Even more radically destabilizing are the perspectives from other disciplines, sealed off from us only by conventional practice yet offering conflicting visions of the approaches and standards appropriate to our problems. Our communities of the competent are within themselves and among themselves, a congeries of overlapping and disparate communities, which dispute—even if tacitly—standards of substance, method, and competence.

Although it is surely worthwhile to articulate professional norms such as impartiality and empirical grounding, which, despite this diversity, allow us to argue with and learn from each other, these norms do not reach the deeper problems of historical contingency. Also, they can slide over into efforts at professional containment. Haskell, for example, turns his standard of impartiality into a fixed basis for professional definition and hence into a tool for policing borders, for declaring certain intellectual values to be the essential determinants of the historians' community that must, in every instance, override other claims. He has been concerned with what he regards as the excessive influence of feminist advocacy on the profession, and such a standard, presumably, can separate legitimate women's history from improper feminist advocacy. But even Haskell's standard requires interpretation; it is no more immune from the contestations of history than any other, and it certainly functions for Haskell as part of a political program.⁴

Megill and Novick do not want any artificial containment of the deep imperative within historical contingency—the imperative to let people follow questions where they lead and enter into conversation with them. Here again, we would find Hollinger, Kloppenberg, and often Haskell in agreement, for they are among the ablest conversers in our profession and have been, first and foremost, the agents of perspectivalism in American historiography.⁵ They are liberals but not saps. Liberals try to give us the best of both worlds, and at their best, precariously, they do so.

Novick not only allies himself with Megill but, in a curious way, he also stands

⁴ Haskell, "Objectivity Is Not Neutrality," 143–52.

⁵ David Hollinger's original discussion of the social basis of objectivity, for example, was part of an effort to open historians' minds to theoretical issues; "T. S. Kuhn's Theory of Science and Its Implications for History" (1973), *In the American Province: Studies in the History and Historiography of Ideas* (Baltimore, Md., 1985), 105–29.

close to Hexter. Novick seems to be saying that the philosophical critique of objectivity has no consequences for historians *qua* historians. It affects how we think about what we do, but it need not affect what we actually write. Those who accept objectivity and those who reject it can write "identical" histories. The belief in objectivity carries no bad consequences for the profession: objectivists are "deluded, but not pernicious."

This radical disjunction between epistemology and practice could be (in the vein of Megill's comment) a postmodern stance. That historians can go on as before without the illusion of an objective reality may simply confirm the strong critics of objectivity who argue that we never relied on that illusion anyway; it was always a construction based on our successful pragmatic judgments and coherences, and there is no reason for it to be missed. Or Novick's disjunction between theory and practice could be (in the vein of Hollinger's comment) the result of an atheoretical orientation typical of historians. The common coin of all the theoretical critiques of objectivity discussed in his book is the idea that all truth is perspectival, a view that leads to distinctive consequences about historical narrative, rhetoric, and the historically situated, dialogic position of the historian. It would be strange if the "historical sensibilities" of historians, as well as the way they "frame their narrative or analysis," were not affected. It seems strange, too, to discount such pernicious effects of objectivity on historical practice as "hyper-facticity."

That brings me to the great unfinished business of the forum: politics. Of all the factors that continually make and unmake agreement within and among the scholarly disciplines, politics may well be primary. J. H. Hexter indicated, lightly to be sure, that Novick's distress about the objectivity question was a product of the troubled waters of the 1960s. His own optimism, though it never flagged, now reflects the brightening *History of Freedom*: "Westward, look, the land is bright." For some Americans, the land always brightens in the west, even in Eastern Europe.

In the discussion following the panel, Joan Wallach Scott amplified Linda Gordon's comments and roundly criticized Novick for failing to face up to the implications of the strong political drive that his evidence showed to be at work beneath the discourse on objectivity. To accept a kind of "pluralism," Scott said, was not an answer but itself a tainted political position. In this reply, Novick seems to accept that political position on tactical grounds, and perhaps substantively as well. However, the issue is not the principle of free expression of views, which is unassailable, but the pretense that it is a sufficient guarantee of real freedom. The critique of "tolerant pluralism" from the left exposed the unequal distribution of power hidden in pluralism and disproved the claim that neutral processes and norms (like objectivity) provide adequate access to the historical conversation. To return now to the old regime of "tolerant pluralism" seems an inordinate counsel of despair and credits the old regime with gains that were made only, and can last only, by political struggle for true diversity.

Finally, we should notice that the political implications of Allan Megill's vision of future historical practice are not altogether clear. He called us to the interdisciplinary stance of the "intellectual" but did not locate that stance in

society. When Michael Roth asked how Megill's recommended posture of epistemological irony could be reconciled with political commitment, Hexter replied that the two need not be practiced simultaneously; Megill, that the two could, and often were in the profession, practiced simultaneously. If Megill's vision of history is "post-professional," it still employs the ironic trope that Hayden White has taught us to identify with the academic profession of history.