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0521343283 - That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession

Peter Novick

Excerpt

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## Introduction

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### Nailing jelly to the wall

At the very center of the professional historical venture is the idea and ideal of “objectivity.” It was the rock on which the venture was constituted, its continuing *raison d’être*. It has been the quality which the profession has prized and praised above all others—whether in historians or in their works. It has been the key term in defining progress in historical scholarship: moving ever closer to the objective truth about the past. Anyone interested in what professional historians are up to—what they think they are doing, or ought to be doing, when they write history—might well begin by considering “the objectivity question.”

In this book I explore the fortunes of the idea of objectivity among American professional historians over the last century. The book recounts how the idea was elaborated, modified, challenged, and defended; the ways in which the idea furthered (and some ways in which it retarded) professional historical scholarship; how other values and agendas of historians have sometimes complemented, and sometimes contradicted, the goal of pursuing objectivity. I do my best to sort out the influences which have moved successive generations of professional historians this way and that on the objectivity question over the past hundred years.

“Historical objectivity” is not a single idea, but rather a sprawling collection of assumptions, attitudes, aspirations, and antipathies. At best it is what the philosopher W. B. Gallie has called an “essentially contested concept,” like “social justice” or “leading a Christian life,” the exact meaning of which will always be in dispute.

The principal elements of the idea are well known and can be briefly recapitulated. The assumptions on which it rests include a commitment to the reality of the past, and to truth as correspondence to that reality; a sharp separation between knower and known, between fact and value,

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and, above all, between history and fiction. Historical facts are seen as prior to and independent of interpretation: the value of an interpretation is judged by how well it accounts for the facts; if contradicted by the facts, it must be abandoned. Truth is one, not perspectival. Whatever patterns exist in history are "found," not "made." Though successive generations of historians might, as their perspectives shifted, attribute different significance to events in the past, the meaning of those events was unchanging.

The objective historian's role is that of a neutral, or disinterested, judge; it must never degenerate into that of advocate or, even worse, propagandist. The historian's conclusions are expected to display the standard judicial qualities of balance and evenhandedness. As with the judiciary, these qualities are guarded by the insulation of the historical profession from social pressure or political influence, and by the individual historian avoiding partisanship or bias—not having any investment in arriving at one conclusion rather than another. Objectivity is held to be at grave risk when history is written for utilitarian purposes. One corollary of all of this is that historians, as historians, must purge themselves of external loyalties: the historian's primary allegiance is to "the objective historical truth," and to professional colleagues who share a commitment to cooperative, cumulative efforts to advance toward that goal.

Although radically compressed, this is, I think, a fair summary of the original and continuing objectivist creed—an ideal to be pursued by individuals, policed by the collectivity. Some components of the concept have been reworked or reinterpreted over the last hundred years. There is nowadays, among even the firmest supporters of the idea of objectivity, a bit less confidence in the capacity of historians, no matter how rigorously trained, to completely purge themselves of all values; a resulting tendency to ground objectivity more in social mechanisms of criticism and evaluation, and less in the qualities of individuals. There is somewhat less talk, though still a good deal, of approaching the past "without preconceptions" and "letting the facts speak for themselves"; increased tolerance for hypotheses, and a greater emphasis on interpretations being tested by facts, instead of derived from them. Following from this there is a tendency to think of the collective voyage toward the truth as involving tacking, rather than sailing in a straight line toward that final destination. In recent discussions "contributions to knowledge" are somewhat more often seen as dialectical, rather than as permanent bricks added to an edifice. But despite these recent modifications, older usages remain powerful, and perhaps even dominant. The basic outlines and guidelines of the original program have remained remarkably enduring.

Ideas are frequently defined with reference to what they oppose. While in the late nineteenth century "objectivity" was usually contrasted with "subjectivity," in the last half-century "objectivism" has struggled against "relativism." The latter term 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.<sup>1</sup>

One approach to the idea of historical objectivity which will not much intrude in my account, but one which has informed my inquiry, is to think of the idea as "myth." "Myth," of course, can be a fighting word, though perhaps a bit less these days than it used to be. Today academic Christians routinely speak of the myth of Christ's redemptive death; academic Marxists refer to the myth of the emancipatory mission of the proletariat; in neither case is there any implication that the myth in question is "false," or that the venture it sustains is dubious. My use of the term, in accordance with current practice, implies nothing about the truth or falsity of what is being discussed. Rather it is a device to illuminate the important functions which "historical objectivity" has served in sustaining the professional historical venture; and, since myths are by definition sacred, the tenacity, indeed, ferocity, with which it has been defended.

There are "founding myths": Mircea Eliade writes that myth is "the recital of a creation; it tells how something was accomplished, began to *be*. It . . . speaks only of *realities*, of what *really* happened, of what was fully manifested." The reality it describes is *sacred* reality: "a reality of a wholly different order from 'natural' (or 'profane') realities . . . saturated with being . . . equivalent to a *power*."<sup>2</sup>

A central problem for any new cognitive structure is to legitimize its epistemological foundation. This may involve a myth of an individual genius or hero whose personal qualities exemplify the way in which the new knowledge is acquired. Thus the cult of Newton, who "dared not to know," or of Freud, who heroically conquered anxiety in analyzing his own dreams. The epistemological claims of cultural anthropology rest heavily on the myth of Malinowski's magical capacity to insert himself

<sup>1</sup>"Relativism" and "relativist" were usually labels applied by defenders of the idea of objectivity to their critics—not self-designations. The labels stuck, and have entered historians' language, so I have used them. "Objectivism" and "objectivist" are not terms which, until the last few years, were much used by historians, or even philosophers. For this reason, and because of my conservative resistance to neologisms, I have been reluctant to use them, but finally overcame my reluctance on grounds of urgent need. (It would be very difficult to write several hundred pages on the belief in the divinity of Christ, and on believers, without "Christianity" and "Christian.")

<sup>2</sup>*The Sacred and the Profane* (New York, 1959), 95.

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within a culture so thoroughly that he could describe it "from the inside." As we shall see, the myth of Leopold von Ranke as value-free investigator, interested only in "the facts," played a not dissimilar role in American historiography. Without some such myth, cognitive structures lack grounding and authority. This is at least as important for the morale of practitioners as it is for the lay audience, which must be convinced of the superiority of what the new discipline has to offer: in the case of late-nineteenth-century professional historians, the superiority of their wares to the "partisan" and "tendentious" work of the gentleman-amateurs who had hitherto dominated American historiography.

But myths are not only concerned with origins; they function in the present. For Malinowski, myths were pragmatic charters of extant social institutions, closely corresponding to social and cultural arrangements. A myth is "not merely a story told, but a reality lived. . . . It expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficacy of ritual and enforces practical rules for the guidance of man." On this view, the myth of historical objectivity has served to safeguard and enforce norms of scholarly rectitude; it vouches for the efficiency of scholarly rituals: "purging oneself of preconceptions," procedures for the verification and criticism of sources, meticulous documentation.<sup>3</sup>

Emile Durkheim spoke of the indispensable integrative and stabilizing functions of myth for any social organization: to insure solidarity, to guard against lawlessness and chaos. The way in which norms of objectivity served to integrate and stabilize professional historical activity is a recurring theme of this work, and we will encounter repeated concern of scholars at the "anarchy" of competing truth-claims. In a very different spirit from Durkheim, Georges Sorel stressed the capacity of myths which looked toward the future to mobilize rather than stabilize. There is abundant testimony to the inspiration which historians derived from the conviction that they were participating in a collaborative effort which was progressing toward the ultimate and unitary objective historical truth; equally numerous are assertions by historians that without such faith they would see no point to scholarship, and would abandon it.

Claude Lévi-Strauss has maintained that "the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a (real) contradiction"—at least to mask or minimize the contradiction. For the founding fathers of the historical profession there was a contradiction between, on the one

<sup>3</sup>Bronislaw Malinowski, "Myth in Primitive Psychology" (1926), in his *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Glencoe, Ill., 1948), 78–79.

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hand, singular events in the past (there had been *one* American Civil War), and on the other hand, the existence of the most widely varying versions of those events. The *e pluribus unum* in the myth of historical objectivity promised to resolve the contradiction, through a unitary convergent history which would correspond to a unitary past.<sup>4</sup>

Students of primitive myths often tend to write of them as timeless and unchanging. But this is by no means always, or perhaps even typically, the case. Myths change, are questioned, or even abandoned, as the needs and purposes of actors change. Competing values intrude, which may demand modification in previously settled beliefs. For historians, periodic demands for the political mobilization of scholarship produced very serious strains in the myth of objectivity. Myths are at risk when that which they prophesy fails to materialize. Christian doctrine was strained by the indefinite postponement of the Second Coming; Marxism, by the failure of capitalism to collapse on schedule. In such cases some renew their dedication, others introduce doctrinal modifications, some abandon belief. Early professional historians were confident that they could move rapidly toward an agreed-upon objective historical truth; the repeated frustration of this hope produced the same range of responses as among Christians and Marxists, from neo-orthodoxy to apostasy. What was once functional in a myth may cease to be so in changed circumstances. In periods of ideological consensus, the conviction that "truth is one" has been reassuring; in more contentious times, a pluralist, perspectival orientation was more effective in maintaining professional civility between competing schools. Myths arise within the framework of surrounding cultural values, assumptions, and thoughtways; they flourish, more or less unaltered so long as these are stable. A sea change in the larger culture can threaten their viability. The most obvious instance in the last three hundred years of Western history has been the consequences of the growth of a scientific world view for religious myths. In the case of historiography, as particular axioms of "the scientific method" were called into question, ideas of objectivity rooted in older conceptions of science came to be seriously at risk.

Following the standard practice of historians treating any body of belief, "mythic" or otherwise, I put to the side questions of the truth or falsity of that which is being described. We live in an era of blurred genres and the collapse of many of the traditional boundaries between disciplinary approaches. But though the lines are fuzzy, there remain important differences between the approaches of the philosopher and the historian

<sup>4</sup>Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York, 1963), 229.

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in dealing with the history of thought. Philosophers, as a result of both training and inclination, can rarely resist engaging in systematic critical evaluation of the thought they discuss. We historians, as a result of our training and inclination, are professionally sensitized to the historicity of intellectual life: the extent to which the emergence of ideas and their reception are decisively shaped by surrounding cultural assumptions, social setting, and other elements of their total historical context. We are thus reflexively loath to apply implicitly timeless criteria in judging what we describe and, historically, explain.

All of this is true, and needs to be said in making clear the nature of this undertaking. But it is more than a little disingenuous if it is taken to imply either that I have no views on the issues in debate, or that I believe I have succeeded in preventing those views from coloring my treatment. (Ridiculous notions.) Every reader wants to know "where an author is coming from," and insofar as I can do so briefly, I would like to respond to this perfectly appropriate curiosity. What I can't do is hope to satisfy those who exigently demand to know if I am "for" or "against" objectivity.

I don't think that the idea of historical objectivity is true or false, right or wrong: I find it not just essentially contested, but essentially confused. Many philosophical assumptions of the concept seem to me dubious; some of the key elements in the objectivist synthesis I consider psychologically and sociologically naive. As a practical matter, I think it promotes an unreal and misleading invidious distinction between, on the one hand, historical accounts "distorted" by ideological assumptions and purposes; on the other, history free of these taints. It seems to me that 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. Another way of describing my stance is to say that, in general and on the whole, I have been persuaded by the arguments of the critics of the concept; unimpressed by the arguments of its defenders. Both sets of arguments are fully, and I hope fairly, set forth in the body of this work. No doubt many who read them will reach conclusions different from my own.

The immediately preceding remarks constitute a radically compressed summary of my philosophical position with respect to historical objectivity, offered not because it is of any inherent interest to anyone, and not as one I propose to defend with arguments, since this isn't that sort of book, but in the spirit of full disclosure. Insofar as philosophy aspires to monitor coherence, anyone who even briefly plays at philosophy may be said to be "against" the continued use of a concept he or she finds incoherent: in this case, for me, "historical objectivity." However, I am but a philosopher north-northwest; when the wind is southerly I know better

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than to declare myself for or against ideas solely on grounds of coherence. Consider the following:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights. . . . That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men.

Rarely have so many ambiguous terms and dubious propositions been compressed into such a brief passage. By rigorous philosophical criteria the passage is nonsense. But far from being, in the well-worn phrase, "pernicious nonsense," it is *salutary nonsense*. Belief in these "self-evident truths" has for more than two hundred years provided one of the strongest bulwarks of liberty and equality in the United States. I don't know what it would mean if someone asked me whether I was for or against the ideas expressed in the passage, and I would have no idea how to respond.

Above all, the reason why I cannot take a position for or against objectivity is my historicism, which here means simply that my way of thinking about anything in the past is primarily shaped by my understanding of its role within a particular historical context, and in the stream of history. Sir Isaiah Berlin, following Hegel, has described the history of thought and culture as "a changing pattern of great liberating ideas which inevitably turn into suffocating straightjackets." As concerns the idea of objectivity, the characterization seems to me a bit exaggerated at both ends, but the general historicist point is clear enough. This is about as far as I think it appropriate to go in satisfying readers' curiosity as to "where I stand" on the objectivity question. An historian with a different position on the question would surely write a very different account. When one does, no doubt many of my astigmatismisms will be corrected; it is likely that new ones will be introduced.<sup>5</sup>

"Nailing jelly to the wall" was a crusty political historian's characterization of the attempt to write intellectual history. Having attempted to deal historically with a concept as gelatinous as "historical objectivity," I am not inclined to quarrel with the description. I have said a bit concerning what I think about the jelly; a few words are in order about the wall, the nail, and the hammer I have chosen.

Practically all the work that has been done in the history of historical thought is biographical: studies of an outstanding individual historian, or at most of two or three outstanding individuals. Even works in historiography which are not explicitly biographical typically devote them-

<sup>5</sup>Berlin, *Concepts and Categories* (New York, 1979), 159.



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selves to no more than a dozen major figures. If, when dealing with the outside world, historians have repudiated the "great man theory of history," there appears to be a residual great man theory of historiography.<sup>6</sup>

There's a good deal to be said for the biographical approach. Some historians are so interesting and influential that they certainly deserve extended treatment. Anyone who would seek to grasp the full richness and complexity of an individual's life and thought can do so in at most a handful of cases. But the sort of figures about whom biographies get written are exceptional, and it doesn't make much sense to ground generalizations about professional attitudes as a whole on the study of those who are most unrepresentative. Accordingly, I have spread my net much wider and have surveyed the writings, published and unpublished, of hundreds of members of the profession, scattered in dozens of collections across the country. My treatment retains an "elite bias" in that I have paid more attention to historians of some consequence or visibility. Even within this group, my survey has not been systematic, as rigorous quantifiers use the word. The English historian G. Kitson Clark has advised anyone venturing a generalization: "do not guess, try to count, and if you cannot count, admit that you are guessing." But this inquiry is not one that lends itself to counting. Thus my generalizations are, as Clark said of those offered by historians in these circumstances, "necessarily founded on guesses, guesses informed by much general reading and relevant knowledge, guesses shaped by much brooding on the matter in hand, but on guesses none the less."<sup>7</sup>

The price I pay for emphasizing breadth of coverage 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,

<sup>6</sup>The word "historiography" can be confusing. Running through the English language there is a distinction between "logys" and "graphys": "biology" (the science of life) and "biography" (the description of lives); "geology" (the science of the earth) and "geography" (the description of the earth); etc. The once respectable word "historiology" has dropped out of just about everybody's vocabulary, and "historiography" has had to do double duty for both "historical science" and descriptive accounts of historical writing. Strictly speaking, "the objectivity question" is an *historiological* issue, but all historians speak of it as "historiographical." Go fight city hall. Context will, I think, always make it clear in which of the two senses I am using the word.

<sup>7</sup>*The Making of Victorian England* (London, 1962), 14. In fact I tried to count and failed. Some time ago I spent the better part of two years coding the evaluative language used in thousands of historians' book reviews, punching IBM cards, and attempting to correlate the language employed with dozens of other variables having to do with historians' generation, field, status, etc. It was a total waste of time, producing nothing intelligible and permanently dampening my enthusiasm for introducing quantitative rigor into intellectual history.



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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. But what one loses in the ability to unpack the nuances and complexities of individuals' thought, in "doing them justice," one may gain in the validity of generalizations, and appreciation of the variety of contradictory currents within the profession, and their interaction.

If readers want to know where an author stands with respect to the subject at hand, colleagues are equally interested in getting a fix on the author's "school"—his or her methodological approach. In the history of science, and, by extension, the history of academic disciplines generally, there are "internalists" and "externalists." As the names suggest, those in the former camp concern themselves with what goes on inside the discipline, slighting or ignoring its relationship with the surrounding environment; the latter focus on one or another aspect of that external relationship. Cutting across this division, there are "cognitivists," who focus more or less exclusively on the substance of scientific or scholarly work and its rational development, and "noncognitivists," who stress psychological, sociological, political, or other factors in the development of disciplinary communities and their work.

My own deepest methodological commitment is to the "overdetermination" of all activity, including thought. Therefore, for me, explanation and understanding necessarily involve the exploration of the widest variety of overlapping influences, and this book straddles both the internalist versus externalist, and cognitivist versus noncognitivist divisions: explores them all, and does its best to integrate them. I discuss at length the development of intellectual arguments within the profession on the objectivity question; ways in which shifting external currents of thought shaped this discourse; aspects of the changing sociology and economics of the profession, and the psychology of historians; ways in which historians responded to various political and other demands from the larger society. This is the principal reason why the book is so long.

Such ecumenism might be thought to satisfy everyone (except those who like short books). But it won't. The oldest and still the most powerful tradition in intellectual history and the history of disciplines is both internalist and cognitivist—committed to the autonomy and rationality of either intellectual life in general, or of the work of a particular disciplinary community. Nowadays, those in this tradition feel under assault as a result of the growth in the number of externalists and noncognitivists, who are charged with "irrationalism" and "reductionism." Their interpretations, it is claimed, treat the substance of thought as "merely"

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or "nothing but" a reflection of social dynamics or external interests. Internalist cognitivists rarely consider what seems to me the self-evident truth that to treat thought as exclusively rational and autonomous is equally reductionist.

My multilayered approach should protect me against charges of reductionism. The question of whether my approach is "irrationalist" is more complex, and I am inclined to enter a plea of *nolo contendere*, or even "guilty with an explanation."

Most work in the history of disciplines deals with the development of substantive specialist knowledge: how chemists have changed their minds about chemistry, economists about economics. These processes—the development and refinement of theory, the discovery and interpretation of facts, carried out meticulously by trained investigators—are the essence of what we mean by "rationality." Recent work in the history, philosophy, and sociology of science has made us increasingly aware of the influence of external and social factors in theory choice, in deciding what is "a fact," and even in defining "rationality." Still, at least for our present purposes, I acknowledge that it is reasonable to expect that an inquiry into the development of substantive, specialist knowledge should direct itself primarily to the internal and the cognitive; only secondarily to the external and the "irrational."

The extent to which historians develop their substantive knowledge "rationally" is a tangled question, hinging largely on definitions of rationality, and also on whether by "knowledge" we mean relatively isolated factual propositions or broad interpretations. But—again, for present purposes—let us call it "rational." It certainly is true that with respect to particular issues, for example, the profitability of slavery, historians bring specialized knowledge and techniques to bear; that their conclusions are largely governed by historians' rules of evidence and inference which they have internalized, and which the historical community monitors; that whatever their backgrounds, whatever their desires, whatever they'd like to believe is true about the profitability of slavery, what they ultimately wind up concluding is powerfully constrained by all of these factors. For these reasons it would be appropriate to write of historians' changing views on the profitability of slavery as primarily the history of rational men and women bringing reason to bear on the question.

But the present work, unlike the vast majority of histories of history, is not concerned with the evolution of substantive historical interpretations. It concerns what historians have thought about the objectivity question—a subject about which they know less and care more. These differences are crucial with respect to the issue of "irrationalism."