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That Noble Dream

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That Noble Dream

The “Objectivity Question”
and the American Historical Profession

Peter Novick
University of Chicago



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For V.J.Z.

We may look . . . with justifiable satisfaction on the impressive output of sound, creditable . . . works on American history. . . . dominated . . . by one clear-cut ideal—that presented to the world first in Germany and later accepted everywhere, the ideal of the effort for objective truth. . . . A year ago [Charles Beard] contended [that] the ideal of impartiality was an impossibility. . . . [A]t the end of fifty years of historical work the fundamental ideals that underlay it are positively rejected. A nonpartisan search for the truth . . . is declared to be impossible. . . . [A] growing number of writers discard impartiality on the ground that it is uninteresting, or contrary to social beliefs, or uninteresting, or inferior to a bold social philosophy. . . .

It may be that another fifty years will see the end of an era in historiography, the final extinction of a noble dream, and history, save as an instrument of entertainment, or of social control will not be permitted to exist. In that case, it will be time for the American Historical Association to disband, for the intellectual assumptions on which it is founded will have been taken away from beneath it. My hope is, none the less, that those of us who date from what may then seem an age of quaint beliefs and forgotten loyalties, may go down with our flags flying.

—Theodore Clarke Smith, 1934

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Preface

In writing this book I have been stimulated and sustained by my friends in the Workshop in the History of the Human Sciences at the University of Chicago—Keith Baker, Arnold Davidson, Jan Goldstein, Bob Richards, and George Stocking: an exemplary intellectual community. Others who have read portions of the manuscript and contributed useful criticisms or suggestions include David Abraham, Susan Frank, Jim Grossman, Harry Harootunian, Don Levine, Don McCloskey, Bill McNeill, Joan Novick, Dorothy Ross, and Laurence Veysey, as well as anonymous referees. I could not begin to list the friends and colleagues, at the University of Chicago and elsewhere, who have supplied information, on whom I have tried out various ideas, or who have helped me in various ways, large and small; I thank them all.

Another sort of intellectual obligation is often acknowledged by bibliographical footnotes: “On this subject see. . . .” My indebtednesses of this kind are so numerous that had I listed them the notes would have crowded the text off the page, so except for a few instances where my treatment closely followed that of another writer, I have not done so. I trust this omission will not be considered ungenerous. The staffs of libraries and archives which I visited in the course of my research have been extremely helpful in furthering my work. My thanks to them, and to the staff of Cambridge University Press, in particular that paragon of an editor, Frank S. Smith, but also my production editor, Janis Bolster, and copy editor, Nancy Landau.

A few technical matters: I have been sparing with the use of initials for organizations and periodicals in both the text and the notes. The major exceptions are AHA and *AHR* for the American Historical Association and *American Historical Review*; MVHA and *MVHR* for the Mississippi

Valley Historical Association and *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*; and after their names changed, OAH and *JAH* for the Organization of American Historians and *Journal of American History*. I have made archival citations as precise as I could, but in several cases collections were so disorganized (at least at the time when I used them) that no precise references could be given. Rather than further burden the footnotes with full information on the location of manuscript materials cited, I have used an abbreviated form, and included a list of the collections used in an appendix at the end. I have not repeatedly said “italics in the original” when quoting because all italics in quotations were in the originals. In one respect I have departed from standard scholarly practice: in quoting from letters I have corrected spelling and punctuation when the meaning was clear. In this context to truffle such quotations with “[sic]”s seemed to me mean-spirited.