

History and American Historians: Reflections on an Inquest

By Robert G. Colodny

THAT NOBLE DREAM: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession

By Peter Novick

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FOUR decades ago when this reviewer was just entering the historical profession as a Ph.D. candidate in history at the University of California (Berkeley), it was a common lament among his colleagues that although American historians had written the history of practically everything under the sun, there was no scholarly account of the history of the American historiographical profession, a body of learning that set forth clearly the traditions of the profession, how its norms had come into existence and what indeed were the professional requirements of an aspirant to this profession. This lacuna has now been overcome by the magisterial work of Peter Novick. The author is a professor of European history at the University of Chicago, a

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specialist in the history of the Vichy regime and the underground movements that opposed the Petain and Hitlerite occupation forces during World War II.

The subtitle of the book, "the objectivity question," refers to the longstanding dispute within the profession, particularly from its professionalization in 1874 to the present. The issue simply stated was, by what standards should an historical account be judged? The history of this conflict, which one must assume still continues, goes back to those early years when American scholars had traveled to Germany to obtain graduate study in the historiographical disciplines. This was at a time when German scholarship was the envy of the western world, not only in the natural sciences but also in the so-called human sciences. And the icon of the human sciences was Leopold von Ranke (1795-1896), a German scholar whose works on the history of the Reformation, the history of the medieval popes, the rise of the great nation states of the Germanic and Italian peoples, etc., were the glory of German historical scholarship.

Von Ranke had bequeathed to his American followers a peculiarly ambiguous aphorism which in German read "*Wie es eigentlich gewesen es*" — that is to say, it was the task of the historian to state precisely what had happened. This aphorism of von Ranke's was an

admonition to his fellow German scholars to eschew mere tradition, folklore, and legend, and to base oneself exclusively on authenticated documents. To von Ranke this was the only way in which history, the study and reconstruction of the past, could become an *exact science*.

Here we face an amazing paradox at the very foundations of the American historical profession. The Americans, who were philosophically naive, interpreted von Ranke to be advocating a form of blind empiricism. Yet von Ranke himself was closer to Hegel; in his great works on the nation states he had said in effect that they were the "thoughts of God." Here one sees clearly the Hegelian imprint. And yet by looking just at the aphorism, the American pupils returned to the United States and implanted at the very beginning of the professionalization of historical study a cult of naive empiricism.

Whether or not this suited the American temperament is beside the point. The blind worship of fact, and fact alone, was thought by these Americans to represent the procedures, the methods of scientists. Here they followed Locke, who was a 17th century scholar, and the Lockian psychology and the Lockian inductivism derived from Francis Bacon, who was an even earlier scholar; they took all of this to be indicative of what a scholar must do, what his attitude must be

towards the unknown, in order to be "scientific." This initial misinterpretation of von Ranke would haunt the American historical profession down to almost yesterday. In Novick's beautiful account of these epistemic struggles, he makes the following statement: "that philosophical incompetence as far as he knows never interfered with the professional advancement of American historians."

Now if von Ranke was the misinterpreted John the Baptist of the historians' church, the first heresiarchs were surely Charles Beard, Carl Becker and James Harvey Robinson. They can be viewed loosely as offering a counterpoint to blind empiricism, namely what has come to be called relativism. By relativism one should understand such cognate terms as climate of opinion, frame of reference, generational flux, etc., by which it is meant that each generation of historians, having undergone different types of experience and living in a different part of the eternal flux of social change, will approach the past with different questions in mind and different modes and standards of interpretation. And it is this latter word that carries most of the weight of Novick's analysis of the dispute between the empiricists and their rivals. These relativists sought "to interpret," which meant finding some kind of correlation among the facts, some underlying reality. Here Whitehead's warning to scientists at the turn of the century that "no science is more secure than the metaphysics that it presupposes," might have been heeded by the historical empiricists. In the great schools of American historiography, however, this Whiteheadian precept was honored by being largely ignored.

There is a dark underside to the story that Novick relates in this massive and thoroughly documented work. In the beginning, American historiography was

dominated by the great institutions of the Northeast—Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia—later to be joined by such institutions as Johns Hopkins, the University of Chicago and those Ph.D. factories, the University of Wisconsin and the University of Michigan. Prominent in our own time are institutions such as North Carolina, the University of California and Stanford. In the beginning, the attitude of the professoriat in the Northeast was exclusionary, exclusionary toward Jews, Catholics, blacks and women. Contempor-

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tuaries of the sons and daughters of the lower middle class and the working class who knocked on their doors, they were quite openly unhypocritical about class prejudice, asserting that only those who came from "old established families" would have the "sensibility," a word they loved without defining, to probe historical problems. By the end of the book, one is aware of a kind of Whigish characteristic to the evolution of the historical profession, particularly in the last 30 or 40 years. Most of the barriers have been dropped. Jews have been elected to the presidency of the American Historical Association; so have Catholics. Blacks have gained entrance, and not only as scholars: black history is now being incorporated into the curriculum of even the most prestigious institutions. The same can be said for the feminist penetration into the halls of ivy;

there are now not only women historians, but women's history is also a part of the curriculum.

A great part of the book is devoted to the period since the beginning of World War II. And this too carries a dark side. As historical inquiry moved into other domains of human experience, beyond the narrow political, constitutional and military, great segments of human experience were separated from the main core of historiography and became separate disciplines with their own journals, their own associations. This is particularly true for the history of science, the history of the arts, and the history of technology. As these primary functions of the human mind and social endeavor separated out, one wonders what was left to be the core of historiography taught in the contemporary graduate schools. As Novick points out, although the volume of historical study and writing increased, the profession as such became more and more fragmented. It became almost impossible for conversation and scholarly dialogue to take place across these artificial disciplinary barriers. The little fiefdoms prospered, but the profession itself sank into greater and greater chaos; one small sentence toward the end of Novick's book carries this story. The students are beginning to "vote with their feet."

Enrollments in history courses have dropped and a general public which would probably respond to well-told historical accounts is driven to rely more and more on amateur versions of our own past and of the world's past. Amateurs such as the Durants, Harold Lamb, Barbara Tuchman, John Reed, Edgar Snow, Alexander Werth, William Shirer, Vincent Sheean and similar writers have greater readership than all of the monographs turned out by Ph.D. seminars combined. Something has surely gone amiss. But perhaps there is some light at the end of Novick's

tunnel. What seems to be lacking is some principle of synthesis in the graduate schools. Where this will come from, nobody can say, particularly for somebody as immersed in the ongoing struggle as the reviewer. However, he can recall an incident some 20 to 25 years ago when he first encountered the wonderful synthetic work of George Sarton, the Belgian scholar who had brought the history of science to the United States, shortly after the end of World War I. In a long essay, Sarton had asserted that the history of science, if properly structured and taught, could be that discipline that would unify all of the other disciplines. Whether or not this was an impossible dream, only the future can tell.

American historians from the very beginning of their professionalization have been taught to eschew philosophy of history. They had contempt for it. A potential synthesizer could have been found perhaps in the works of Marx and his followers, but these people had been discouraged from entering the profession and those who did quite often soon found themselves on the outside looking in. But even this has changed. Not so many years ago, Eugene Genovese, a follower of at least neo-Marxism, was elected president of the Organization of American Historians.

Perhaps as the world becomes more and more of a global village and more and more philosophies of history or interpretations of history get plugged into the electronic network that joins all of the great universities of the world together, some kind of synthetic idea may be born in the same way that in the 17th century all of the physical sciences were unified by taking on the language of mathematics and adopting the experimental method. Then began the great push against the frontiers of ignorance.

This, by the way, had been the dream of the early empiricists in

the American historical profession. But they grossly misinterpreted the methods of science. When Darwin came along, they seized on the crudest version of Darwinism; they interpreted him to be a radical empiricist and used a vulgarized version of his thought to justify racism in the United States. Social Darwinism colored their interpretation of the Civil War and Reconstruction. They seemed unaware that taken literally, their version of Darwin suggested that the Confederate states and their "peculiar institution" were not fit to survive.

One haunting question is left at the end of Novick's book, at least in the mind of this reviewer. Has the history of the American historical profession been unique, reflecting unique characteristics of American political, social, and cultural history, or is it part of a more or less universal phenomenon? Light on this subject might have been shed had Novick looked at such works as George P. Gooch's *History and Historians of the Nineteenth Century*, and James Westphal Thompson's work, *A History of Historical Writing*. One could also learn something by going back to ancient works, to take a look again at Thucydides, at Polybius, at Tacitus, at Appian, and try to determine whether or not these ancient founders of our craft reflected certain particular social and political conditions of their time. We know that this was certainly true of historical writing, or the historical chronicles of the Middle Ages, when there was an overriding orthodoxy and a more or less kind of universal folklore, the kind of thing that von Ranke was rebelling against. But a second look might tell us something about the American experience. To what extent has the profession been geared consciously or unconsciously to protecting a certain set of elitist social values inherited and passed on generation after generation? Have we as the keepers of

historical memory been as objective as the discipline demands, or have we sometimes been intellectual prostitutes? ■

After the Holocaust: The Migration of Polish Jews and Christians to Pittsburgh

By Barbara Stern Burstin

Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989. Tables, notes, bibliography, index. Pp. ix, 219. \$19.95.

PROFESSOR Barbara S. Burstin's book, comparing Christian and Jewish refugees who had emigrated from Poland after World War II, is a very ambitious and worthwhile scholarly work. Using important primary materials such as first-hand recountings by 60 Christian and 60 Jewish Polish refugees (survivors) who had come to Pittsburgh after the war, feelings, attitudes and concerns for the future are examined.

In the first chapter, the author points out "that the Polish people experienced, with the exception of the Soviets, the barbaric excesses of Hitler's Germany" (page ix) and notes the reasons that both Christians and Jews left their homeland and came to America. In a series of sensitive interviews, she delves into the reasons each group gave for desiring to settle in America, how each felt about Poland 35 years later, and what problems both had to face during and after the war. Her work reveals that compared with the Christians, the Jews, by far, continue to be more bitter about Poland. They likewise feel some bitterness against Christian Poles. Some of the Jews questioned told of beatings they had endured before the invasion of Poland by the Nazis, treatment as second-class citizens, being turned over to the Nazis, sufferings in the concentration and work camps, and of two survivors weigh-