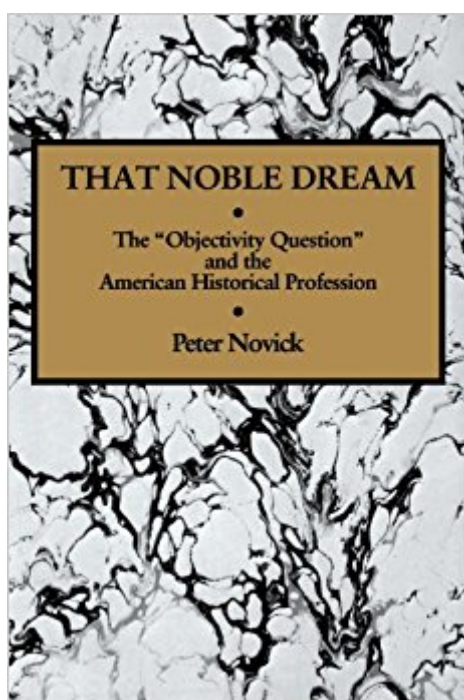


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# That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' And The American Historical Profession (Ideas In Context)



## Synopsis

The aspiration to relate the past "as it really happened" has been the central goal of American professional historians since the late nineteenth century. In this remarkable history of the profession, Peter Novick shows how the idea and ideal of objectivity was elaborated, challenged, modified, and defended over the past century. Drawing on the unpublished correspondence as well as the published writing of hundreds of American historians, this book is a richly textured account of what American historians have thought they were doing, or ought to be doing, when they wrote history-how their principles influenced their practice and practical exigencies influenced their principles. Published with the support of the Exxon Education Foundation.

## Book Information

Series: Ideas in Context (Book 13)

Paperback: 662 pages

Publisher: Cambridge University Press (September 30, 1988)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0521357454

ISBN-13: 978-0521357456

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1.3 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 2.4 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.8 out of 5 stars 20 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #56,427 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #51 in Books > History > Historical Study & Educational Resources > Historiography #122 in Books > Textbooks > Social Sciences > Political Science > Political History #183 in Books > Textbooks > Humanities > History > Europe

## Customer Reviews

"Professional historians and aspiring professionals will welcome this immensely informative and thoughtful book." E. Cassara, Choice "Peter Novick has written an unprecedented and invaluable study of the idea of objectivity among historians...He has written a rich and powerful narrative. No other scholar has made such a marvelous contribution to our understanding of the history profession during its first century." David W. Noble, Reviews in American History "This is a work marked by admirable clarity, wide-ranging and imaginative research, and thoughtful judgements. At one level it explores a question of central concern to scholars of many disciplines--the quest for objectivity in research and writing. Displaying impressive command of intellectual history, Novick

situates this quest in broader currents of American thought over the past century. That Noble Dream is finally a serious and often provocative treatment of the professionalization in the United States of the discipline of history." From the Allen J. Beveridge Award Citation "This is a work marked by admirable clarity, wide-ranging and imaginative research, and thoughtful judgements. At one level it explores a question of central concern to scholars of many disciplines--the quest for objectivity in reading and writing. Displaying impressive command of intellectual history, Novick situates this quest in broader currents of American thought over the past century. That Noble Dream is finally a serious and often provocative treatment of the professionalization in the United States of the discipline of history." From the Allan C. Beveridge Award Citation

The evolution of the "idea" and "ideal" of objectivity is traced over the past century from a selection of unpublished as well as published writings of hundreds of American historians.

I cherish this book. Beautifully written. A book that always makes the cut when I cull my book collection. Peter Novick was great.

Great condition to be used

Great book for historians. Explains the origins of American academic histories better than any other book I've found. It was very helpful for my lit review on narrative history. I also appreciate that the language and prose are accessible to the general public.

So many of my graduate school cohorts were so intimidated by this great work that they could not even read it. Many of them talked about how it was too complex, too complicated, and boring. I, however, completely disagree. I picked up this book and began to read from the beginning and literally could not stop. It is stunning to get so much information about the profession of history, the process of professionalization, and many of the great personalities in the field of history. Novick walks the reader through the development of the profession with clarity and nuance. Everyone who thinks they are a student of history simply is not until they have read this magnificent work whether you agree with his conclusions or not.

Clean and neat book in excellent condition.

In the late 1980s the American historical discipline appeared to be in crisis. Over the previous two decades, the field had fought a war on two fronts: first, the discipline had watched its student enrollment numbers dwindle since its high point in the late-fifties; second, a fifth column tore the discipline apart from within—the difficulty here is in determining whom or what constituted the fifth column. Indeed, it could be interpreted that the American historical discipline had become a fifth column unto itself. This is the image of the historical discipline that Peter Novick closes *That Noble Dream* with—a discipline so directionless and devoid of solidarity that it was on the verge of breaking apart into sub-disciplines. In the midst of crisis, Novick's ground-breaking study on the American historical discipline seeks—and largely succeeds in doing so—to trace just how the discipline ended up where it was in the late 1980s. A firmly contextualist intellectual history, *That Noble Dream* follows the question of objectivity, i.e. whether or not the historian ought to strive toward objectivity in his or her scholarly work, throughout the history of the American historical discipline and approaches the various reasons for why opinions on the matter changed over time. Like a pendulum caught between Apollo and Dionysus, the majority opinion on the objectivity question shifted back and forth over time. In the tradition of the Cambridge School, Novick gives thorough treatment to the societal factors that gravitated the pendulum from one side to the other. Novick divides his work into four parts, which happen to coincide with both the popularity or unpopularity of "objective" history and major historical events. This is deliberate (p. 628). At the founding of the American historical discipline in the late-nineteenth century, to be objective—to depict history as it actually happened—was not only seen as an ideal, but as an attainable goal. Novick has various reasons for why this may have occurred: the introduction of the notion of objectivity coincided with America's emergence as a dominant economic power and intellectuals became caught up in the resulting wave of positivist feeling (p. 21); American scholars mistranslated the Rankean ideal by not taking into account the contemporary ambiguity of "eigentlich," or "actually" (p. 28); American proclivity toward "unphilosophy" made challenging the quite philosophical ideal impossible (p. 30); finally, that the sudden emergence of the American education industry created such a high demand for college educators that abysmally poor scholarship was able to permeate the historical discipline unchecked (p. 48); further, that the discipline, as new, seemed to require that it be professional and scientific, so that it could be seen as a legitimate academic field (p. 70). What is important to keep in mind here is that Novick does not claim these factors to be purely causal, rather he posits them as symbiotic factors, both aiding and abetting historical opinion. Nonetheless, the objectivists, fact-obsessed—in some instances to the extent that Mr. Gradgrind would be

an appropriate comparison and mistrustful of the newly created social sciences, had taken the throne. Objectivity was at the core of the early American historical discipline. It was its founding myth (p. 268). Faith in the rational was shot to pieces by WWI.

Objective history had come to be seen as ridiculous, like a commander endlessly, insanely even, sending his troops over the top "just one more bombardment, one more push, one more cavalry charge, and the battle will be won: a true understanding of history will be attained, so long as the ideal of objectivity is history's soldier of fortune. Charles Beard and Carl Becker led the historical coup d'état against the objectivists, arguing that it was not for the past itself that history ought to be studied, rather history ought to be adapted to the Everyman's needs (p. 256). More importantly, that it was impossible for history to be approached in a purely objective manner (p. 258). Objectivists perceived this as a threat to their very way of life. Relativists saw it as a necessary step toward better understanding history.

Importantly, though these two sides clashed, objectivists did not directly take on the assertions of Beard and Becker (p. 260). Objectivists balked, but they had little interest in engaging in a philosophical debate, in much the same way that Ranke's unphilosophical nature was appealing to the founders of the American historical profession. Unlike WWI and its outcome, which left many Americans wondering why exactly the United States became involved in the war in the first place, the purpose of WWII was unambiguous: defeat the Japanese because they attacked America. The outcome of WWII reinforced this point: the Nazis "nearly mythical in the ways in which they were depicted after the war" had been defeated and now a new enemy loomed: the Soviet Union. Riding a teleological wave, historians turned back to objectivity. The historical retrieval of this idea was perpetuated by the massive expansion of the historical discipline after the war, thanks to Cold War dollars flowing through the university system.

Ph.D.'s of history had doors outside the academy opened to them. The government needed bodies to run its vastly expanded bureaucracy and brains to devise its policy. An intellectual machine was engineered to engage in a war of ideas (p. 317) on behalf of the newly created "West" (p. 312) against the Soviets, and historians played a significant role in this battle (p. 309). The purpose of history was clear: promote the right idea of history to reinforce national identity, or "Western" identity. This meant a resumption of "fact-based" history, in which the "facts" made clear that the United States was in the right over the Soviet Union (p. 316). Affirmative historiography had made a comeback (p. 320). It would be disingenuous, however, to take this all on its own. As Novick emphasized, the fear of nuclear war was truly present in the minds of historians in the decade

following WWII (p. 314). Like the symbiosis that marked the first-wave of objectivism in history, the objectivists in the second-wave were both justified and the justifiers. As the Cold War thawed, the need for a nationally affirmative historiography became less immediate. Historically oppressed groups rose up in the political sphere. Oppression had gone on long enough, and waiting longer for the the white male majority to right their own historical wrongs was no longer an option. The rights of blacks and women must be seized by blacks and women themselves. This sent waves through the historical discipline. Rather than a nationally affirmative history, these groups sought an identity affirming history by taking pride in their difference and by deconstructing the oppression of the past to better understand their present condition (p. 471). Gone was the universality of history and its practice. Black history was to be written "by blacks for blacks" (p. 491), and this sentiment prevailed in women's history as well. Black and women's history seceded into different disciplines, and the hyperspecialization of history, caused in part by the post-WWII academic environment, had begun to make the discipline appear to be a loose confederacy of sub-disciplines, in which historians from one end of the discipline could not even converse with historians on the other side of the discipline. In a discipline inherently unpredictable and therefore non-affirming of itself (p. 582), and one in which its members are mostly indifferent to the philosophy of the discipline itself (p. 593), what other outcome could come about? Is the dissolution of history as a discipline the logical, nigh inevitable, outcome? And that is the depressing "to some, infuriating" question with which Novick leaves his readers. It is also the point at which skeptics are prompted to assume defensive positions, and justifiably so. History was not and is not in tatters. It is an inherently interdisciplinary discipline, and this point could have been emphasized by Novick further. Another point which Novick did not emphasize enough was one of his implied, albeit central, arguments: that the objectivity debate has done more harm than good to the discipline. He wrote early on in the work that he did not think that "the idea of historical objectivity is true or false" (p. 9). The resulting and recurring self-immolation of the historical discipline on this question, then, was purposeless. Of course, it could be countered that the objectivity debate was not nearly so pointed in the late twentieth-century as it was in the early twentieth-century, but then Novick's use of Abraham affair sufficiently argues otherwise. These complaints are, generally speaking, questions of manner and preference. Novick's primary goal in this work "to show how the evolution of historians' attitudes on the objectivity question has always been closely tied to changing social, political, cultural, and professional contexts" (p. 628) "was rigorously defended and convincingly conveyed, and it is through this that That Noble Dream deserves seminal recognition.

This book was something I had to buy for a class. It was in good condition but I had to force myself to read it. Can a person ever truly be objective they can try but they are always influenced by something. That is the book in a nutshell.

This is a long and tedious book and I would never have read more than the first page if it had not been assigned for a graduate course. Why do academics think more words means better? The information is good, the writing just keeps you from getting to the info.

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