## Letter from A Historian

# History and Truth in the Age of Trump

Jonathan Levy

When I was a doctoral student at the University of Chicago in the mid-2000s, I had the pleasure of helping a retiring professor, Peter Novick, pack up his office. A grand office it was—old, spacious, perched at the top of Harper Library, with a stunning view of the Quads and the Chicago skyline. I think that for me the grandeur of that view encapsulated the grandeur and dignity of the professional guild I then aspired to join.

If I had shared that lofty sentiment with Peter, he would have made fun of me, mercilessly. Novick was an irascible contrarian. His best-known book was *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*. In it, Novick told the history of the idea that historians should strive to objectively know the truth about the past. That was what history, in the end, was all about. Basically, while Novick admired much historical scholarship that resulted from chasing "that noble dream," he concluded that the idea of objectivity was incoherent, if not naïve. He once told me, as I packed away endless shelves of history books, that one of the highlights of his professional career was when after presenting a chapter of what became *That Noble Dream*, two giants of twentieth-century American intellectual life—the philosopher and historian of science Thomas Kuhn, and the philosopher Richard Rorty—approached him to say how much they enjoyed his attack on objectivity. Rorty, at the time—this was during the 1990s, I think—was famous (infamous) for calling for a temporary ban on the word "truth" in philosophical discussion. He thought the question of truth was distracting intellectuals from what really mattered—not chasing down some truth that was out there in the objective ether, independent of us, but rather searching for human possibilities in a shared democratic society. These are possibilities perhaps not yet glimpsed, let alone realized, so they cannot be out there yet for us to recognize as objectively true.

My friend Peter Novick, a great historian, died in 2012. And I wish he were alive, for many reasons, but especially because I'd like to ask him what he thinks about the status of "that noble dream" today, given the contemporary political landscape. It is a landscape in which the public sphere has fractured, like so many hammers on a sheet of glass, and where individuals and groups retreat to their partial societies, their partial truths, their personal Facebook news feeds.

As historians, are we today not at risk of becoming yet another partial society? Today, do we not need to reassert the facticity of truth, independent of political prejudice or advantage? Has democratic politics not swayed us too far from what might be for all of us a shared anchor of objectivity? Can history not be a useful corrective to these worrisome trends? I think the answers to these questions are: Yes, Yes, Yes, and Yes. But, with Peter, I still don't believe that objectivity should be the primary, animating aim of historical scholarship.

As historians, we know things about the world that non-historians do not know. About the surprising scope and varied qualities of human experiences, about how and why polities, societies, economies, communities and cultures evolve and transform. We know these things, our truths, not because the past is "out there" waiting to be discovered by us and objectively rendered to those outside our partial society. We know them because of the shared discipline of our practice. Because we read carefully and listen to our sources. Because we use our good judgment, born of our fidelity to those sources, in constructing honest narratives about change and continuity across time and space, which challenge and confirm our common humanity.

We know things. When many historians of Novick's generation lost their faith in objectivity, they kept on writing history, of no lesser quality, following the same practical rules of generations before—the same rules we still follow today. But I do think that many had their confidence sapped, that they stopped communicating what they knew, and why it was important, to a broader public, outside the partial society of professional historians.

Not Peter Novick—he went on to write a great book, for a wide audience, *The Holocaust in American Life*. Before he died, he told me he had an idea for another book, which would try to explain why, every so often, a book by a historian caught the public's imagination and made a difference in the wider culture. The working thesis was that such books caught on not because they achieved that noble dream, but because they used the craft of history to make people think about the present and the future differently. They opened up possibilities for better living. My bet is that someday a current undergraduate history major will write a book like that.

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