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After Objectivity: What Comes Next in History?

Kenneth Cmiel

Objectivity, that dull-witted monarch who despotically ruled the discipline of history since the late nineteenth century, lies dethroned. The work of Hayden White and Hans Kellner reflect the new predominance of structuralist and poststructuralist literary theory in the province of the philosophy of history. Among those, like Dominick LaCapra, who speculate on methodologies, the story is the same. Working historians, as Peter Novick makes clear in his panoramic study of “objectivity” among American historians, pay less and less lip service to the ideal (598). While theorists like Kellner, White, and LaCapra urge the chopping block, the king’s subjects are deserting. Will it be long before we will say, le roi est mort?

It is by no means clear what exactly will follow. Objectivity will certainly survive at least as a feudal baron. Kellner, White, and LaCapra, who by no means agree on everything, share certain convictions about what should come next, and literary scholars will easily recognize their suggestions: the scientism that legitimated objectivity’s rule must be discarded; history is to be understood as a branch of literature. These authors also urge a turn to rhetoric. Historians have to realize how their discourse is inevitably shaped by its own materials. Language does not represent reality so much as constitute it.

Yet literary scholars should pause before rejoicing at the conversion of history to congenial perspectives. The clear message of Peter Novick’s That Noble Dream is that the reign of objectivity is being replaced by a diversity over which no one is in charge. Objectivity, Novick argues, was a central and controlling concept for the founders of the American Historical Association in the 1880s. The emphasis on the disciplinary context was tied to a positivist epistemology that placed great weight on bringing the facts to light. Patient sifting in the archives would allow historians to see the truth, the past as it really was.

As Novick tells the story, despite post-World War I assaults by relativists like Charles Beard and Carl Becker, something
resembling a chastened objectivity reemerged triumphant after World War II. It was only in the late sixties and seventies, with the growth of dissidence within the profession, that the norm became problematic. The appearance of women and African Americans in the profession, of postmodern theories of knowledge, and of a significant number of leftist historians all undermined (at times unwittingly) the rule of objectivity. While Novick himself suggests in the closing chapter that “there was no king in Israel,” his own reference is to the bewildering pluralism of the contemporary profession.

Novick’s whole story, from the late nineteenth century to today, stresses the consensual underpinnings of objectivity. When the discipline was unified, questions about objectivity moved to the background. And he argues that it is the profession’s diversity—political, sociological, and methodological—that has driven objectivity from the throne. Consequently, the literary theory of White, Kellner, and LaCapra will have to jostle for attention with quantifying positivism, Geertzian cultural anthropology, Gramscian Marxism, a lot of traditional archive-digging, the study of mentalités, various neo-objectivisms, and whatever else happens to come down the road.

Despite his obvious sympathy for White and LaCapra, Novick’s rather traditional interest in the profession’s sociology sets him off from the other authors who focus more single-mindedly on epistemological and methodological issues. White’s Content of the Form builds on almost two decades of work in the field. Indeed, White’s Metahistory (1973) served as a lightning rod for the whole turn of historiographical theory from an interest in the logic of explanation to issues of narrative and representation. That book unpacked the rhetoric of Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, and Burckhardt, arguing that four basic tropes imposed themselves on all history, and that understanding this rhetoric was far more important in grasping what history was about than any analysis of how the author grubbed the archives.1

The Content of the Form collects essays primarily written in the early eighties. They show that White has developed a heightened interest in narrative theory. Narrative, for White, is the essential form by which humans code their experience. The impulse toward narrative is a will for order, a means of avoiding Derridian chaos. But while emphasizing the import of narrative in our mental makeup, White also argues that narrative is not a form of realism, at least if one understands realism as a literary style that gives a clear and direct rendering of the world.2 White follows Barthes in arguing that what has been called literary
“realism” structures reality just as much as any discourse. The facts never speak for themselves, according to White, a point that explicitly distinguishes his narrative theory from that of Paul Ricoeur’s.

Dominick LaCapra’s *History & Criticism* is a set of essays reflecting on the most recent methodological preoccupations of historians. It reflects only one part of his rich and varied oeuvre, for he is certainly among the most productive and creative intellectual historians active today. In some ways his position is more “radical” than White’s. LaCapra speaks favorably of Derrida, expresses reservations about White’s hesitancy before poststructuralism, and forcefully argues that texts cannot be treated as closed things. Yet although LaCapra has been called “an American Derridian,” he resists that label, insisting his approach is far more eclectic (“Lumpers” 8–10). Indeed, he has also made creative use of other literary theorists, notably Bakhtin. At bottom, LaCapra hopes that the move to a rhetorical understanding of history will allow a dialogic relationship with the past—one where the historian no longer poses as a scientist domesticating the past so much as a single participant in a conversation across time.

Hans Kellner’s *Language and Historical Representation* applies the insights of recent literary theory to the discipline of history. For Kellner, the basic trope of history is not paraphrase but allegory. History needs to be understood as akin to fiction. The book includes an insightful chapter on beginnings and endings in historical texts, showing how they do not flow from the events but are in fact strategic ruptures chosen for specific purposes. Even better is his discussion of quotations, explaining how they are never innocently chosen, always tied to the historian’s textual needs. Finally, there are his readings of specific historians. His chapters on Guizot and Michelet are well worth the effort; on Fernand Braudel and Hayden White among the best in print.

These historians call for a rhetorical understanding of history, although they understand rhetoric very differently. Kellner and White see rhetoric as the study of tropes. Their central concerns focus on how language structures discourse and creates meaning. LaCapra sees this as very important, but adds that rhetoric is also about the production of arguments. Using history rhetorically should make us all more modest and self-critical, LaCapra notes, but it does not undermine “critical rationality” (37).

None of the authors expresses any faith in the idea that history is written by simply looking at the evidence and seeing
what it adds up to. But where exactly does the downfall of
objectivity leave the "facts" in historical discourse? Novick at
several points claims that facts are relatively unimportant in
undermining a historical position (10, 220–21). White is much
bolder, asserting that since narratives do not truly reflect any
"reality," historical accounts cannot be undermined by mere
evidence (45–46). Kellner also writes at length about how his-
tory is essentially constructed by its rhetoric rather than its
sources. "[L]inguistic conventions," he asserts, are "the actual
sources of historical work" (10).

All three imply a distinction between "facts" and "inter-
pretations," or otherwise put, between "evidence" and what
the philosopher Charles Taylor calls the "embedded picture." None
has any objection to making sure that the events of a
historical account really happened. They do not countenance
historians making things up. And Novick also suggests that facts
are important on certain issues, say deciding the profitability
of slavery. But they also claim that the larger picture that the
historian creates is essentially beyond empirical testing.

LaCapra is at once both more daring and more timid. On
the one hand, he can deny that facts have any independent
status, claiming that any isolated datum is not found but con-
stituted (35). But at other places he casually, and confusingly,
talks of the data as if they did exist, and observes that he is not
against fact-gathering in history, only the deification of it (92).

Elsewhere LaCapra has claimed that the historian "must
attend to the facts, especially when they test his own convictions
and desires," a position that not only implies a world of data
independent of figuration, but which also places him at odds
with White and Kellner (Rethinking 63). White is most explicit
on the point that historical narratives mold evidence to their
own ends. Events themselves are meaningless; there is no pat-
tern in the carpet. Historians impose all narrative form: "no
given set or sequence of real events is intrinsically tragic, comic,
farcical, and so on . . . (44).

Surely this is overstated. The story of the destruction of six
million Jews or of who knows how many Cambodians is not
so pliable as White suggests. Even in the postobjectivist world,
the information intrudes. Accepting the death of positivism does
not mean that issues of evidence can be treated cavalierly.

Naturally, neither White nor Kellner would sanction san-
tizing history to serve theory. White suggests moral arguments
against such a reading of the Holocaust (76–80). Kellner also
says that he does not countenance the suppression of inform-
ation, something that would presumably prohibit a whitewash
on purely evidentiary grounds (24). This last point, however, is unsatisfying on two counts. First, it is just an aside, never clearly developed. But more important, it runs against Kellner’s whole argument, which emphasizes how all history involves suppression. And that Kellner sees this process as essentially willful makes his disclaimer even more problematic (323). It is difficult to see what Kellner means when saying that evidence cannot be suppressed given his own determined unpacking of all history as made by rhetorical decisions that flow irrespective of what have conventionally been seen as the sources.

Kellner and White to the contrary, it is possible to say that certain rhetorical choices do so much violence to the data that they fall outside the bounds of acceptability on evidentiary grounds alone. Why do they go wrong on this point? Despite their efforts to undermine boundaries, Kellner and White regularly deploy rather rigid distinctions between logic and rhetoric, between positivist and linguistic understandings of history. “On the one hand,” Kellner claims, “there is the attitude that historical substance always rests upon the materials that make up its sources, and that any significant change in our vision of the past will result from an advance in research that unearths new facts.” On the other hand is the view that “mental protocols, always linguistic at base,” are “infrastructural,” while “the facts are the superstructural materials. . . .” While Kellner presents these as “polar points of view,” he never discusses more nuanced positions in between. His own provocative rhetoric—“getting the story crooked,” the “ideology” of truth, the “authoritarian” discourse of reality—gives the game away. Kellner sides with those who claim that “mental and linguistic conventions, are primary . . .” (10).

Such stark divisions, as Tzvetan Todorov has noted, are common to much recent literary theory, but, Todorov wisely observes, there is no reason to accept them (Critique 179–93). Like LaCapra, he asks for a dialogic criticism, one that cuts through these dualisms. We need not pose the question as either/or, fact or rhetoric. William James, no friend of any correspondence theory of truth, spoke of the “double influence” of “beliefs” and “facts,” each “co-determining each other incessantly.” From a different direction, historian Allan Megill has recently posited a model of historiography that could incorporate both evidence and trope. The linguistic dimension can be seen as important, even central, while still arguing that evidence sets limits on available options. Thus questions about evidence are not relegated to the dustbin, but enter alongside
issues of authorial preconceptions, the rhetoric of the account, theoretical or methodological strategies, and so on.

I suggest that this is what will happen anyway. Two of the most recent public controversies in the historical profession were over evidentiary issues. Novick discusses both in That Noble Dream. One pitted two scholars against each other in a court of law testifying as to whether Sears Roebuck had historically discriminated against women. The other was the case of David Abraham (a student of Novick’s), whose Marxist account of big business and the rise of Hitler was savagely attacked by other historians as wantonly inaccurate, even purposely deceitful. Where there is contention about a historical account, it appears that debate about evidence, whatever its epistemological status, will be unavoidable.

LaCapra veers toward a more authentically pluralistic position than White or Kellner. He argues that neither the objectivist nor relativist positions are adequate, denying, like Todorov, that they exhaust the possible options (137–38). LaCapra, in History & Criticism, asks for a combination of textual and contextual procedures, something he has repeated elsewhere (“Lumpers” 3; History, Politics 7, 209–10). Yet some critics are skeptical, claiming that LaCapra has not clarified how to mesh the disparate elements. His prose, they argue, is overwhelmingy weighted toward deconstruction while only paying lip service to contextualist issues. All too often such criticism of LaCapra is decidedly overwrought, an excuse to denounce any discussion of the activistic side of cognition, though it does reveal something about the relative distribution of weight in LaCapra’s prose. LaCapra readily admits his emphasis and insists that it will help redress an imbalance in historical discourse (“Lumpers” 6).

For all these writers, the disinclination to posit any coherent positive role for evidence seems even odder in that they are all, deep down, a bunch of moralists. White’s attack on objectivity is closely connected to his distaste for the profession’s pose of value-neutrality. White’s heroes have always been the moralistic historians of the early nineteenth century. His prose is full of references to things like “our specifically human being” (Tropics 23). White has attacked the criticism of Derrida, Blanchot, and de Man for its inability to pose a way out of its own “absurdist” trap. In short, White’s belief that historical narrative is inevitably fictional should not be confused with his saying that it is beyond good and evil. To careful readers this has been evident from the beginning. As White put it in Metahistory, the “best
grounds for choosing one perspective on history rather than another are ultimately aesthetic or moral rather than epistemological” (xii). 7

But while consistently defending ethical history, White has spent the last two decades writing on epistemology. Again, this has provided useful ground clearing, but it gives no guidance on how ethics (or aesthetics) could inform historical debate. Kellner, in one of the best chapters in his book, traces White’s interest in the rhetorical tropes of history to a basically existential commitment to radical freedom. The meaninglessness of history is only half the story. The other side is our basic need to invent some order for the chaos. Kellner finds Jean-Paul Sartre a “hidden presence” in White’s work (212). But especially since White wants to avoid the “absurdist” position of some forms of poststructuralism, readers need more than casual asides to past humanistic traditions. If all history is fictional, then how can we valorize an ethical history? Isn’t that just as “fictional” as the epistemological variety? Why one and not the other?

LaCapra proceeds similarly. Like White, his critique of epistemology is part of a renewal of ethics. He asks for a revival of a “Renaissance ideal of historiography,” one that is “ethicopolitical” and “rhetorical” instead of scientificistic (9). And he associates this with a dialogic history. Yet also like White, LaCapra does not attempt even to give provisional reasons for how an “ethical” dialogue can be conducted. He pulls the ground from positivism but only offers the broadest programmatic strokes in defense of his “ethicopolitical” history. Why wouldn’t ethicopolitical discourse, rhetorically inspired, be just as “irrational” as the so-called objective history was? Are there any ground rules? Or are values as inscrutable to reason as evidence, in which case historical discourse would be a battle of wills and power masquerading as “conversation” or “dialogue”?

Kellner leaves the same gaping hole between the ethical vagaries that are supposed to be more important and the epistemological sophistication that actually drives his text forward. He argues that the shift from logic to rhetoric was dictated by essentially moral arguments (23–24, 226, 319). And he shares White’s existential belief in the radical autonomy of human will. We have but to proclaim ourselves free actually to become free. With regard to our confrontation with the past, Kellner suggests, all this freedom will be to the good if it is connected to some human purpose, or if it pushes the historical imagination farther, or if it reanimates the historical sublime (323, 333).

Readers are left with little sense of a concrete ethical vision.
The sketchy existentialism of Kellner and White is by no means self-evident common sense, but they treat it as such. While both writers urge that historians become *engagé*, they themselves present no ethical point of view beyond a call for a more open-minded historical profession. Kellner and White are moralists without a morality.

Even if they are right about the radical autonomy of human will, they slide by some of the most critical ethical issues, those about how human beings live among each other in a world with scarce resources, profound cultural differences, and unequal distributions of wealth and talent. These questions return us to the necessity of binding human beings together, not existentially liberating them. Yet such questions never have to arise because the existentialism of Kellner and White is directed at an extremely specific target—the historical profession.8

The critiques by White, Kellner, and LaCapra are clearly tied to the current philosophical attack on foundationalism, the belief that our knowledge has to be rigorously grounded in some way. They are part of the effort to “overcome epistemology.”9 But because they have chosen bad methodology as the point of attack, their own discourse remains overwhelmed by issues about how we know and how historians have thought we know. And this keeps them wedded to the disciplinary setting, despite their own efforts to critique contemporary professionalism.

To be sure, all express doubts about contemporary professionalism. Novick, in his account, calls White’s attitude “pre-professional” and that in some ways is surely apt. White at one point traces the disease of objectivity to the birth of professional history in the nineteenth century (24–25), a point that Novick amply documents in his own book. LaCapra, for his part, while admitting the benefits that specialization and professionalism have brought, also wants history to be more—“not simply a profession but a vocation” (11).

Yet in many ways these authors remain profoundly professional. White’s tone is scholastic, replete with dense terminology that makes his prose a very hard read for those not deeply versed in recent literary theory. LaCapra’s essays are almost all on what other professional historians are doing wrong—the disciplinary matrix is assumed in page after page. Only if one makes the error of confusing “interdisciplinary” with “anti-professional” can we say that they leap beyond contemporary professional discourses. But borrowing from other disciplines has existed ever since the academic professions were created. That these writers now borrow from literary criticism instead of sociology I do not find a significant difference. The discourse
of White and LaCapra belongs to the academic forum. It is professionally respectable prose, written by and for other academics, and about how professional historians should do their work.

A truly "preprofessional" history, guided by a Renaissance sense of rhetoric, would proceed very differently. Its audience would be "civic" instead of "academic." As Jerrold Seigel, Elisabeth Eisenstein, Michael Mooney, and a whole host of other historians have noted, the Renaissance turn to rhetoric was tied to the belief that knowledge and wisdom had to be communicated beyond learned circles. It must reach a public. The revival of a rhetorical theory of history might be more aptly tied to those theorists who have worried about the fate of the public sphere in the twentieth century—Europeans like Jürgen Habermas, Hannah Arendt, and Terry Eagleton, Americans like John Dewey and C. Wright Mills.

LaCapra is most alive to such issues. He carefully notes shifting opinion on the rise and fall of an outside reading audience for history. And he suggests that "in so far as the study of history is a vocation as well as a profession, historical research cannot be completely confined within disciplinary boundaries or subjected to evaluation by professional tribunals alone. It is accountable to a larger, often divided audience" (11). And still elsewhere, he observes that his own effort to subvert contemporary categories of discourse might not make a dent in institutional practices of contemporary life (109–10).

While admirable, such comments are not developed. It is not spelled out whether LaCapra wants the relevant tribunal to be other disciplines or, more broadly, some public. Moreover, such comments are not adequately linked to the contemporary world at large. What good is a Renaissance conception of history in a world where the public, conceived as that group which discursively forms the political will, is largely absent, replaced by numbing specialization in work-life and a basically apolitical mass consumer culture in the off-hours?

Kellner and White do not claim they defend a traditional rhetoric (Kellner, Language 23, 325–26; White, Vico 219–22). Their interest in how historians create texts is related to their existentialism, not to any scholarly concern about how one is persuasive in the public forum. Yet it is not at all clear to me how this threatens academic professionalism. Gerald Graff, in Professing Literature: An Institutional History, has artfully traced the theoretical disputes of the English profession from the 1880s
through the 1980s. (His book, in fact, should be seen as a companion volume to Novick's.) Graff argues that from the origins of the profession in the 1880s, debates about theory and method (with the challengers always presenting themselves as "antiprofessional") were resolved by parceling out certain positions in English departments to each point of view. Thus theoretical dispute was never as seriously challenging to the system as initially thought. Outsiders were eventually brought into the fold. All parties found a niche. This is likely to happen in the newly pluralistic historical profession.

LaCapra, White, and Kellner locate too much of the problem within the historical profession itself, and too specifically with some wrongheaded methodology. They could use a dose of Daniel Bell or Christopher Lasch who understand the postindustrial society not as texts to be rhetorically dismantled but as indicating the framework within which historians will continue to operate. The professional context, as the very prose style of all four authors makes clear, will continue after the death of objectivity.

Novick is sympathetic to White and LaCapra, but avoids some of their problems precisely because he takes his sociology seriously. In a study of prodigious learning that is surely to be the standard work on American academic history for many years to come, one of Novick's key insights is that objectivity's reign was rooted in a political consensus as much as any epistemological posturing. The biggest contemporary enemy of objectivity is the profession's political, social, and methodological diversity. And Novick also realizes that objectivity's death will not kill professionalism per se. The discipline, rooted in the organizational matrix of late twentieth-century life, will persist even without any overarching defining purpose. Novick's own critique of narrow professionalism is realistically modest, suggesting that he tries to straddle "professional" commitments with those of "human being and citizen" (14).

But this implies a more nuanced position than the others offer. And it suggests that intellectual energy be expended on matters for which all these authors express little interest. How does one construct a preprofessional history in a postindustrial society? What meaning can Renaissance rhetoric have for history produced in a culture that combines a phenomenal division of labor in intellectual work (as in all work) with an escapist mass culture? In what ways can one combine being a professional with being a human being and citizen? The way to get
beyond epistemology is to get on with the questions that come next.

Notes

1. *Metahistory* is sometimes read as an American version of French structuralism. White himself, however, made clear in his footnotes that his own intellectual debts were to Northrop Frye and Kenneth Burke rather than to Claude Lévi-Strauss or the early works of Roland Barthes.

2. Kellner presents White as essentially a foe of narrative (315–23). I would argue that White opposes the objective pretensions of narrative, but not narrative as such. The impulse to narrate is “natural,” says White, adding that, “Far from being a problem, then, narrative might well be considered a solution to a problem of general human concern, namely, the problem of how to translate knowing into telling, the problem of fashioning human experience into a form assimilable to structures of meaning that are generally human rather than culture-specific” (1). On this point see Michael S. Roth.

3. For Barthes’s seminal essays on realism and history, see “The Discourse of History” (1967) and “The Reality Effect” (1968) (*Rusle* 127–48).

4. “Truths emerge from facts,” James wrote (the plural is critical here), “but they dip forward into facts again and add to them; which facts again create or reveal new truth (the word is indifferent) and so on indefinitely. The ‘facts’ themselves meanwhile are not true. They simply are” (147).

5. Megill divides historiography’s tasks into four—recounting, explaining, arguing or justifying, and interpreting. This scheme makes room for evidentiary issues (under the categories of recounting and justifying) as well as the analysis of tropes (under interpretation). See Megill, esp. 647.

6. See Kloppenberg; Jelavich’s review of LaCapra’s *History, Politics, and the Novel*; tender criticism can be found in Jay.

7. Many other similar passages could be cited. On his critique of some forms of poststructuralist thought, see “The Absurdist Moment in Contemporary Literary Theory” (*Tropics* 261–82).

8. A useful contrast can be made with Hannah Arendt, here, precisely because she battled so many of the same foes as White and Kellner. Like White and Kellner, she worked from an existentialist perspective, distrusted the determinism of social science, and was skeptical of academic professionalism. Yet Arendt wrote about the public sphere, not the academic professions, and her thought took an entirely different turn. See Canovan, esp. 1–3.

9. The phrase is from Charles Taylor. I am not suggesting that LaCapra, Kellner, and White follow Taylor’s position (they don’t), only that they are
engaged in the kind of project discussed from various perspectives in the volume cited, a project Taylor has called "overcoming epistemology."

Works Cited


