BOOK REVIEWS

Truth and Objectivity, part 1: Irony

Rethinking Objectivity. ALLAN MEGILL, Ed. Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 1994. x, 342 pp., illus. $45.95; paper, $15.95. Post-Contemporary Interventions. Reprinted from *Annals of Scholarship*, vol. 8, no. 3/4, and vol. 9, no. 1/2.

Telling the Truth About History. JOYCE APPLEBY, LYNN HUNT, and MARGARET JACOB. Norton, New York, 1994. xiv, 322 pp. $25.

The Library of Congress contains two—only two—books entitled *Truth and Objectivity* (*1*). Both are recent works by professors of philosophy, practitioners of the discipline that for centuries—for millennia—has taken truth and objectivity to be its own most proper concern. How is it that this phrase, long the very motto of the sciences, is only now being put as title to philosophical works? Must not the answer be that these concepts have recently acquired an import different from that which philosophers long attributed to them? Philosophy's traditional affirmative stance toward these concepts, indeed its claim to stipulating the foundations of knowledge, has been widely challenged by "theorizing" springing from other forms of critical inquiry (although the point is in no way admitted in either of the works mentioned above). With patchy beginnings in the early 1960s, then increasingly through the 1970s and 1980s, truth and objectivity were problematized or flatly denied ever more widely by historians, sociologists, and literary critics, by feminists, by multiculturalists, and, more generally, by antagonists of cultural hierarchies of whatever sort. Whereas prior to 1990 the phrase was perhaps simply too presumptuous, too *chutzpahdich*, for an author to claim to discourse on "truth and objectivity" *tout court*, today, in our contemporary—postmodern—intellectual world, which rejects any suggestion of a transcendent warrant for knowledge, the terms are always wreathed implicitly by scare quotes, their every use—even by philosophers of the strictest observance—tinged with some degree of irony (*2*).

This self-ironizing, which permits use of "truth and objectivity" even as it relieves the phrase of pretentiousness, is evident in nearly every posting of "truth" and "objectivity" before a scholarly audience today, whether it be the rightist polemical pamphlet "Telling the Truth" (*3*) issued by Lynne Cheney from her bully pulpit at the National Endowment for the Humanities or the leftist polemical book *The Truth about Postmodernism* (*4*) by Christopher Norris, sometime expositor of deconstruction, from the wilds of Wales. Even scientist polemicists Paul Gross and Norman Levitt, whose *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science* (*5*), reviewed in these pages last year (*6*), showers sarcasm upon "perspectivists" who would challenge the objectivity and truth of the methods and results of scientific inquiry, indicate a recognition that, however vulnerable such "perspectivists" individually may be, the absolutist notions of truth and objectivity that they challenge are indeed indefensible. (Gross and Levitt's own position, stated parenthetically by them on p. 65 of their book, is a reasonable compromise: the perspectivist stance is "fallacious in that it posits total opposition between 'reality' and 'convention' where there is, in fact, intense and continuing interaction.") Shrewdly, Gross and Levitt chose to make few and only scattered assertions about the knowledge that science produces—by implication its claim to universal validity rests upon the wondrousness of technology—but instead devote their book to repulsing with ridicule the alleged onslaught of obscurantists.

Unsurprisingly, the intellectual scene today is little like what Gross and Levitt, with their frankly polemical purposes, make it out to be. In particular, the overwhelming majority of scholars wrestling with the generally acknowledged absence of any universal and indubitable foundations for truth and objectivity—including many who have contributed to the recognition of that absence—do so not as wreckers but as would-be constructors of usable revisions of those concepts, indeed as adherents to some version of just the compromise position affirmed by Gross and Levitt. Both the books under review here, as also the two books to be considered in the continuation of this review in the next issue of *Science*, bespeak this circumstance.

Rethinking Objectivity is the republication as a single volume of 13 essays that first appeared in two double issues of *Annals of Scholarship* edited by Allan Megill. A significant minority of the contributors to Megill's volume have a theme rather more personal and specific than its title: they are rethinking their rejection of objectivity. Barry Barnes, long one of the stalwarts of the "uncompromising" Edinburgh school of the sociology of scientific knowledge, strikes this note in the opening essay. Although Barnes begins by complaining that his program has been misunderstood, he proceeds to admit (p. 27) that "although sociology of knowledge was correct in its uncompromising rejection of epistemology, it should now beware of overshooting the mark. Several of the most significant current difficulties and weaknesses in the field are overreactions to the individualism, rationalism, and realism typical of so much epistemology." In particular, "the 'social construction of reality'" has been taken too literally, taken as an idealist metaphysics that refuses to admit "a reality 'out there'" (p. 32). Likewise former Edinburghian Andy Pickering, famous for his constructivist construal of quarks, introduces his essay—a brief account of "the mangle of practice," his own program for escaping reality-denying idealism—by observing (p. 109) that "the challenge to objectivist philosophy of science has been put most sharply by sociologists of science. . . . My aim is to continue the attack . . . but . . . then, having buried both objectivism and relativism, I will praise them," that is, will "articulate displaced conceptions of both the relativity and the objectivity of scientific knowledge that are more readily defended."

The strongest statement of this theme is by George Levine. Levine begins (p. 65) by listing the cultural constructivist assumptions "so comfortably shared by literary critics and theorists," the last and nastiest of these assumptions (widely associated with Michel Foucault) being that "all knowledge is thus a play for power not for truth." Levine continues: "I do not want to deny these assumptions but . . . to suggest how—if they are held relentlessly—they undermine the very political and epistemological projects they are supposed to support."

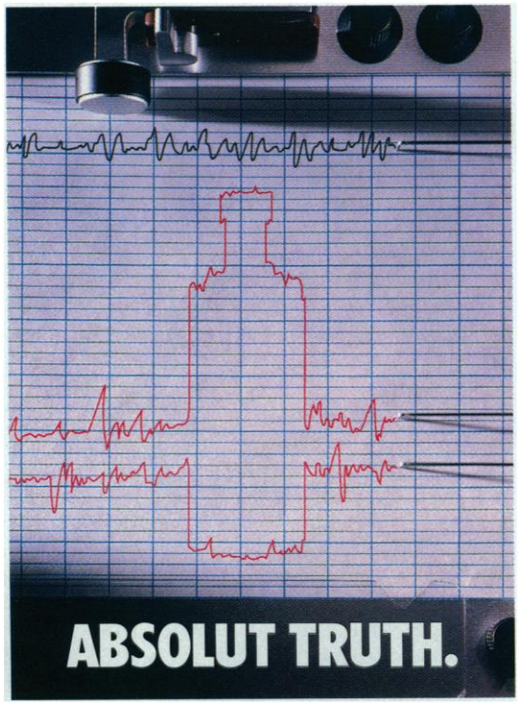
This is the first part of a two-part review considering recent revaluations of science by historians and sociologists. The continuation will appear in next week's *Science* and will deal with *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* by Steven Shapin (University of Chicago Press) and *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life* by Theodore M. Porter (Princeton University Press).

Among such projects, feminism has surely been responsible for the greatest amount of the most radical relativizing of knowledge. It is therefore particularly pertinent that, as Levine emphasizes (p. 70), individuals famous for placing this banner in the van of that movement have more recently been reconsidering their position. "One of the most important expressions of this unease . . . is a recent [1988] essay on the question of 'objectivity' and feminism by Donna Haraway" (who is among those assailed by Gross and Levitt). Levine goes on to quote Haraway as saying, "the further I get in describing the radical social constructionist program . . . the more nervous I get." Such nervousness has led to back-tracking. Mary Hawkesworth, appearing as feminist in this volume, insists (p. 167) that "the point"—hers and, she maintains, that of Helen Longino (another of Gross and Levitt's targets)—"is not to demonstrate the impossibility of objectivity, but rather to illuminate the complexity of attaining it."

Not every contributor to this volume who is already well known for a challenging stance toward objectivity is ready to reconsider. Lorraine Code is not. Yet despite her insistence that her question "Who cares?" is epistemological, Code comes forward here not as one committed to a cognitive enterprise but as a caring feminist activist committed to her "emancipatory projects" (p. 192)—indeed so committed to them that she seems deaf to the pragmatic argument weighing heavily with others: radical relativism may threaten our own projects even more than the enemy's.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith hears very well but rejects this argument. Smith is acutely aware that her allies have been falling away—"My point of departure is a recent [1990] article by the feminist legal scholar Robin West, who argues that objectivist conceptions of judgment are needed in the domain of law" (p. 293)—but she insists that there is no necessary incompatibility between the cake of contingency and the penny of one's projects. "It is not necessary to argue that one's judgments are objectively right or universally valid in order to make them forceful for, and acceptable to, the relevant audiences. Nor is it necessary to claim that they are uniquely grounded in 'human nature' and/or the unchanging features of 'the human predicament' in order to argue their superiority to other judgments" (p. 290). Smith makes her case both by reason and by pointing to her own activism. Nonetheless, it is impossible to avoid the impression that her stance is a courageous *pis aller*, chosen in order to avoid contravening her knowledge that "no axiom can generate our judgments and no principle can secure their objective goodness" (p. 308). Her preference—proper to a scholar—is for a good intellectual conscience over expeditious achievement of her political goals.

While Smith stands out among the contributors to *Rethinking Objectivity* as unrepentantly postmodernist, the manner in which the majority of contributors distance themselves from postmodernism may fairly be described as postmodern—postmodern precisely in their easy assumption, seemingly requiring no special justification, that objectivity (and hence truth) is open to redefinition, *ad libitum*. Had we still the notion that our words should be—because they could be—signs for real things, we would not so readily arrogate to ourselves the freedom to give them convenient meanings. But we no longer have that notion; almost inadvertently, we have all become not nominalists but voluntarists. Thus



An advertisement that recently appeared in *Lingua Franca: The Review of Academic Life*.

Telling the Truth About History, by Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, is a further example of our postmodern presumption of freedom to (re)define, an example that, through its title, expresses—as the price for taking such liberties—our postmodern obligation to ironize our own claims to truth.

"Our aims in this book are simple and straightforward but also ambitious," Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob tell us (pp. 9–10). "We want to provide general readers, history students, and professional historians with some sense of the debates currently raging about history's relationship to scientific truth, objectivity, postmodernism, and the politics of identity. We chart a course of reflection on these issues that we hope will provide new answers." The new answers for these authors are rather older than newer: they, like several of the contributors to *Rethinking Objectivity*, are recoiling from the all too radical extensions of their own, once radical, positions. As young women in the early 1970s they "approached academic careers as outsiders. We have been especially sensitive to the ways in which claims to objectivity have been used to exclude us from full participation in the nation's public life, a fate shared by others of our sex, working-class people, and minorities" (p. 2). "We have not only witnessed but also participated in the dethroning of once sacred intellectual icons. Trained to be 'scientific' in our methods, we have challenged the inherited, traditional interpretations. . . . We have even, perhaps ungratefully, questioned science's claims for disinterested truth and impartial objectivity" (p. 8). And now, in middle age, these three accomplished, even distinguished, historians, having made significant contributions to the reshaping of the discipline of history, are confronted in the classroom by a younger generation that says "by word or gesture, 'That's your opinion, prof'" (p. 2) and thus lightly dismisses the freight of disciplined, objectified knowledge these women had submitted themselves to, and, by strenuous effort, augmented and in some degree reoriented. "And just in case students did not get the point across, there is now a new breed of philosopher who thinks that everything is relative to where you happen to be standing, . . . your patch of social space" (p. 3).

Appleby has published extensively on the history of British and American political and economic thought and life from the early 17th to the early 19th century, Hunt on the political, social, and cultural history of 18th-century France and on eroticism and pornography since the Renaissance, and Jacob on 17th- and 18th-century science in relation to its cultural context. The "course of reflection" pursued is, in large part, recapitulation of main themes of American history and the history of science that the authors have themselves had a significant role in bringing to prominence. The dominant, heroic male WASP narrative of the rise of the United States is challenged in the interest of validating the stories and perspectives of the marginal and exploited. Similarly, the dominant heroic narrative of the advance of objectivity and the discovery of

scientific truth is challenged, not however in altruistic espousal of the interest of any oppressed social group but because the newly professionalized historians of science were "more interested in writing true history than in preserving the truth of science" (p. 171). Implicitly, these self-interested professionals undercut science's claims to objectivity by stressing the connection of knowledge production to a specific "patch of social space," while the radicals among them—Jacob included—went still further, construing the knowledge that science produced as politics by other means.

From this latter "paradigm," and the idealist spin it has received at the hands of postmodernists and radical feminists, the authors are now at pains to distance themselves, although as an afterthought they seek to justify their earlier hostility to the truth claims of science "by the role that what is called Big Science played in the service of the military-industrial complex from 1945 onward" (p. 280). Indeed, Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob go so far as to claim that "The legacy of Cold War science also helps to explain the cynicism, even nihilism, and certainly the intellectual relativism, that greet even the mention of truth and objectivity" (p. 279). A far better case can be made, however, for the contrary thesis, namely, that ideological warfare, first against fascism and then against communism, shored up our belief in truth and objectivity for five decades and that the disrepute into which such beliefs have recently fallen is the result of the withdrawal of that support.

Only rather late in this (not very big) book do the authors get beyond their (not quite to the point) "truthful" histories of America and of science to confront directly "history's relationship to scientific truth, objectivity, postmodernism." Indeed, when they do undertake this confrontation they have nothing more to offer than a collection of programmatic paragraphs—some admirable paragraphs that avow a general commitment to democratic pluralism, along with others that express categorically their underlying, and overriding, attachment to an old-fashioned epistemological realism and individualism. At their best, Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, in company with many other rethinking feminists, contend that "An openness to the interplay between certainty and doubt keeps faith with the expansive quality of democracy. This openness depends in turn on a version of the scientific model of knowledge, based on a belief in the reality of the past and the human ability to make contact with it" (p. 11). They further contend that "the objective does not simply reside within each individual, but rather is achieved by criticism, contention, and exchange. Without the social process of science—cumulative, contested, and hence at moments ideological—there is no science as it has come to be known since the seventeenth century. . . . Objectivity is not a stance arrived at by sheer will power, . . . it is the result of the clash of social interests, ideologies, and social conventions within the framework of object-oriented and disciplined knowledge-seeking" (p. 195). At their worst, Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob tell us that their "theory of objectivity for the twenty-first century" requires us to recognize "that all histories start with the curiosity of a particular individual" (p. 254), "that curiosity about objects is a deeply personal response. . . . Objects arouse curiosity, resist implausible manipulation, and collect layers of information about them" (p. 260). "Knowing that there are objects out there turns scholars into practical realists" (p. 269). "The past easily qualifies as one such object insofar as it resides in the artifacts that survive from it" (p. 284). And in any case we have memory as "validation of the objective reality of the past. The experience of remembering underpins the belief that the past existed" (p. 270).

If we overlook these flailings for a philosophy of history, and ask, rather, where Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob come out on natural knowledge, we find them just about where sociology of science stood when they were in school: "All scientific work has an essentially social character. The system of peer review, open refereeing, public disputation, replicated experiments, and documented research—all aided by international communication and the extended freedom from censorship—makes objective knowledge possible" (p. 281). Although they represent this "message" as the product of "the scholarship of the postwar generation," it is much rather that of Robert Merton, 1935–1955. Far from expressing "a thoroughly argued and historically grounded appreciation for the social construction of knowledge" (p. 280), it is a retreat to an ideologically motivated idealization of life in science—a retreat to just that "socialization" of the heroic image of the individual scientist which 20 years ago the authors' generation of aspiring historical sociologists of scientific knowledge disdained as not true to life. Such are the ironies of postmodernity.

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Vignettes: A Feeling for Reason

We . . . naturally hope that the world is orderly. We like it that way. . . . This idea of a basically ordered world is even one which, today, may be very important to us emotionally, may seem an important aspect of our salvation. All of us, including those ignorant of science, find this idea sustaining. It controls confusion, it makes the world seem more intelligible. But suppose the world should happen in fact to be *not* very intelligible? Or suppose merely that we do not know it to be so? Might it not then be our duty to admit these distressing facts?

This is a real difficulty. We are all children of the Enlightenment, whatever other forebears we may acknowledge. It has been a cardinal principle of our upbringing that we must never believe things simply because we want them to be true. But how are we to apply that principle to cases where our wanting-them-to-be-true is essentially a matter of the satisfaction of reason?

—*Mary Midgley*, in *Science as Salvation: A Modern Myth and Its Meaning* (Routledge)

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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2. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge Univ. Press, New York, 1989—now reprinted eight times), probably has had the largest role in the recognition of irony as a feature of postmodernity, followed perhaps by the writings of Linda Hutcheon.
3. Lynne Cheney, "Telling the Truth" (National Endowment for the Humanities, Washington, DC, 1992).
4. Christopher Norris, *The Truth about Postmodernism* (Blackwell, Cambridge, MA, 1993).
5. Paul R. Gross and Norman Levitt, *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science* (Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, Baltimore, MD, 1994).
6. Bennett M. Berger, *Science* **264**, 985 (1994).