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Editor's Notebook

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Recently, I had the good fortune to attend a lecture given by Dr. Robert Barsky, a Vanderbilt University professor of French, Italian and English known best, perhaps, as the biographer of American left icons Noam Chomsky and Zellig Harris and an expert on the relations between scholarship and public intellectuals in America. Speaking to an audience of Fulbright-Killam exchange students (two of whom were connected to BSU) in Ottawa’s National Arts Center, Barsky told the fascinating story of the rise and fall of *Avukah*, a Jewish student left-Zionist organization in the 1930s and 40s, of which Harris was a leading member. The purpose of the talk was, quite clearly, to inspire the assembled young minds to be publicly active, to take their own ideas about social justice beyond classroom and seminar discussions and into the streets... wherever they may be. Barsky’s talk was inspiring, but what struck me most was an offhand remark he made about his research on *Avukah* and its detractors, for some of whom he felt distinct antipathy. “My intellectual failing has been, for a long time that I have been a partisan.” Overcoming his initial feelings was critical to producing a balanced treatment of his subject, so as to craft a story that he might be able to call “true.” Barsky’s challenge, of course, is the challenge that we all face as scholars: to be (and teach our students to be) objective about the phenomena we study.

Lauding objectivity during this, the high season of political partisanship in America, might seem ill-timed and perhaps even naïve. But Barsky’s comment and the backdrop of political spin in this month’s presidential election lead one to do just that. Objectivity is an impossible value that is always under siege. It is something that those in academia and in public discourse strive toward and of which most of them invariably fall short. It is a worthy notion—an ideal—and, as a mode of expression, it may well be falling out of fashion.

As an academic ideal, objectivity has a history. In their recent book, *Objectivity* (2007), history of science scholars Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison define scientific objectivity rather simply: “the will to will-lessness.” Objectivity is the cornerstone of scientific inquiry and the premise for scientific method. Yet, as they argue, it is a relatively recent influence. Their book examines the ways that early modern scientists depicted nature and its actions in published atlases of scientific images. In the last half of the nineteenth century, these images changed as the experiments of (and use of photography among) physicists, anatomists, crystallographers, botanists and others gradually revealed that nature is imperfect and that there was really no singular or standard example of a leaf, a human body or a splash. In these years, scientists embraced a new way of seeing, to observe what was really there. In so doing, they redefined what it meant to be a scientist.

Objectivity is no less transitory as an ideal in the humanities and social sciences. Even in history, for example, objectivity is a relatively recent guiding concept. It was the “Father of Modern History,” German scholar Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), who first championed the idea of the scientific study of the past in the 1830s. Since then, academic historians have embraced the “noble dream” of unveiling history as it really happened (*wie es eigenlicht gewesen*) using rigorous and exhaustive methods for interrogating evidence from the past. Even though today’s historians seldom agree on what really happened, they still seek the truth, and objectivity remains central to the methods they employ.
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Objectivity has another use among scholars, beyond its place as a practical epistemological ideal or a methodological guide. Objectivity is a literary mindset, an important rhetorical tool, and an idiom of public discourse. Scholars in all disciplines have long cloaked their discussions in the language of objectivity. It’s how they talk; or, at least, how they used to talk.

The traditional language of scholarly objectivity is direct and forthright. The results of inquiries are stated, normally, in plain language that delivers truths unadorned with qualification or equivocation. A thesis is designed to state unassailable truth: “Slavery, westward expansion and the failure of political compromise were the main causes of U.S. Civil War”; “Global warming and the rising of seas levels are a direct result of the increase in human-produced CO₂”; “Evolution is the most convincing theory to explain the development of the natural world.”

To be eschewed are literary devices that personalize or make partisan one’s argument: “I believe that”; “In my opinion”; “In 1776, we rebelled.” Objective writing ostensibly separates the academic writer from his or her findings—truths that presumably any scholar should be able to arrive at should he or she employ the same materials, methods and rigor of the initial research. The main function of objective language is simple: to advance knowledge and avoid needless rancor. Presenting scholarly findings as one’s own belief or opinion or the product of singular thinking invites others to dismiss, disagree with or debate their ideas, and stifle progress. And this orthodoxy has sometimes been applied brutally. One colleague recalls that an undergraduate professor of his had a simple credo for essay writing: “I = F.”

But the rhetoric of objectivity may be changing in the academy. Among those who have weighed in on this matter is the renowned Canadian poet Richard Harrison, a creative writing teacher at Mount Royal University in Calgary, Alberta. Harrison welcomes the personalization of scholarly writing and propounds it as the best way to get today’s students to own their scholarly work and make them feel as though they are participants in the larger academic enterprise of creating knowledge. This fits perhaps particularly well for this generation of students, those for whom email, texting, Twitter, Facebook and other social media have made routine communication intensely personal. As a mode of public discourse, subjectivity is on the rise. And it may affect even the most stalwart defenders of the objective voice soon. There is at least some evidence of first-person creep in a few recent issues of scholarly journals, a potential portent of change.

Does it matter? Well, yes. The way researchers express scholarly findings reflects the assumptions that underlie them. Per Barsky, scholars have long sought not only to be impartial in the ways they approach their research subjects, but to be seen to be impartial as well. Still, as an ideal, objectivity, as Daston and Galison remind us, has its own historical style and rhythm that speaks to academic sensibilities of the day. And so in this way, the language of scholarship—its posture—is a bellwether for changes in scholars’ views about and fidelity to the long-lauded ideal of objectivity.

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It is, at least, in my opinion.