

century later those most committed to the program of the founding fathers depicted themselves as doomed defenders of Masada or the Alamo. Gordon Wood, writing on behalf of what he called "the old fashioned methodology" of nineteenth-century positivism, acknowledged how "philosophically naive . . . even philosophically absurd" it appeared in a "relativist-minded age," but would have historians cling to it, "as we wait for modernism to engulf us."⁵⁰

Hyperobjectivism of the Handlin variety was a minority position within the profession, though a larger minority than allegedly "fashionable" hyperrelativism. But when joined to historians' traditional empiricism, hyperobjectivism could be very powerful indeed. Just how powerful was demonstrated in the "David Abraham Case," the best-publicized historical controversy of the 1980s. The brouhaha was not simply about epistemology; indeed, there was nothing simple about the entire affair. All participants agreed that it raised serious questions of scholarly ethics, and of ideological zealotry; there was much difference of opinion about whose ethics and whose zealotry violated traditional academic norms. The affair certainly shed a good deal of light on the breadth of differences within the profession on the nature and purpose of the historical venture.⁵¹

In 1981, Princeton University Press published Abraham's *The Collapse of the Weimar Republic: Political Economy and Crisis*—a revised version of his 1977 University of Chicago doctoral dissertation. Both in the United States and abroad almost all reviews were favorable, and most were enthusiastic. Previous historical writing about industry and politics in late Weimar had for the most part been directed to the question of business complicity in the rise of Hitler; demonstrating the presence (or absence) of the "smoking gun" which would link industrialists to the Nazi movement. Reviewers, whether or not they looked favorably on Abraham's structuralist-Marxist approach, praised him for breaking out of what had become a sterile debate. His theoretical concern was with

⁵⁰Hughes, "Contemporary Historiography: Progress, Paradigms, and the Regression Toward Positivism," in Gabriel Almond et al., eds., *Progress and Its Discontents* (Berkeley, 1982), 245, 247–48; Gay, *Art and Act: On Causes in History—Manet, Gropius, Mondrian* (New York, 1976), ix–x; Wood, "Writing History: An Exchange," *New York Review of Books* 29 (16 December 1982): 59; Wood, review of Handlin's *Truth in History*, *Journal of Modern History* 53 (1981): 89.

⁵¹At this point a warning to the reader is in order. David Abraham was my student, and is my good friend. I do not believe that the account which follows is biased or tendentious in any of the usual senses of those words, but the reader should know at the outset that I am not at all "neutral" about David Abraham, his persecution, or his persecutors.

conditions of stability in capitalist democracies, and his study of Weimar was an attempt to demonstrate how previously viable compromises between various sectors of industry, agriculture, and labor became unworkable under the impact of political and economic crisis, leaving elites with no alternative to an authoritarian solution. The victory of Nazism was portrayed as the unintended consequence of systemic breakdown.

Not all reviewers were favorable. In an East German journal Abraham was indicted for using "Bonapartism theory . . . [as] an instrument for the whitewashing of the big bourgeoisie and its responsibility for barbarism and war." And the Yale historian Henry Turner, who was in the last stages of work on his *German Big Business and the Rise of Hitler*, the fullest statement of the "no smoking gun" position, attacked Abraham's model as schematic, unilluminating, and unoriginal in the *Political Science Quarterly*. Despite the overwhelmingly positive response his book received in more than thirty reviews, not all was sunshine in Abraham's life. The Princeton History Department had voted to recommend Abraham for tenure, but the university's administration rejected the recommendation. Though he had to look for another job, his prospects seemed bright. As of the spring of 1983, with favorable reviews rolling in, and with his work being hailed by Weimar scholars as a seminal contribution, his future seemed assured. He was on his way to becoming a major figure in the profession. In a way he did, though not as anticipated.⁵²

By his own account, Turner was outraged by the favorable reception Abraham's work was receiving—particularly the enthusiasm with which it was greeted at a Harvard colloquium on Weimar in March 1983. While in his *Political Science Quarterly* review Turner had concentrated on the substance of Abraham's argument ("warmed over" dogmatic Marxism fueled by a desire to discredit capitalism), Turner now took a different tack. He wrote circular letters to numerous historians in Germany and the United States attacking Abraham's scholarship; he urged Princeton University Press to remove the book from circulation; finally, he sent a letter to the *American Historical Review* to inform its readers that the book's scholarship was not just deficient but fraudulent. Abraham's book cited "a letter of October 6, 1931, as evidence about reactions to a meeting that took place five days later," and "a letter written on November 26, 1932, attributed to a man who died five months earlier." The book, Turner said, included references to "a nonexistent book," "a nonexistent

⁵²W. Ruge, review in *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 30 (1982): 290; Turner review in *Political Science Quarterly* 97 (1982–83): 739–41.

journal article," and the "outright invention" of "nonexistent archival documents."⁵³

Abraham, after returning to Germany to recheck archival material, replied in the October 1983 issue of the *AHR* in which Turner's letter appeared. He apologized for citing a letter of October 6 rather than one of October 12 immediately following it in the file; for mistakenly assuming that a "Dr. Scholz" referred to in the archives was the deceased Dr. Ernst Scholz; and for defective citations to the book and article in question, which were not only quite existent, but not all that difficult to identify on the basis of the information he had provided. To the most serious charge of all—wholesale fabrication of archival material—Abraham replied that he had indeed made incorrect inferences about the authorship of a report and its recipient, but that while the errors were regrettable, there was nothing "nonexistent" about the documents. He concluded by observing that there were substantive interpretive differences between Turner and himself which could not be resolved "by appeal to some purely neutral technical principles of disinterested scholarship." Further, that "if there is a *Methodenstreit* lurking here between what one might call positivists and conceptualists," it should be pursued at that level, rather than by seizing on technical mistakes "to discredit a detailed and comprehensive argument without confronting it."⁵⁴

No one took a poll, but there was a general feeling that Abraham had done reasonably well in the exchange, that the public recounting of his errors was sufficient punishment, that his apology was acceptable, and that Turner's characterization of Abraham's errors was uncalled-for and offensive. At this point another actor took his place on center stage: Gerald Feldman of Berkeley, who was "moved to take a stand by comments made to me that Abraham has satisfactorily responded to Turner." Feldman had served as one of the referees of Abraham's manuscript for Princeton University Press and had recommended that it be accepted,

⁵³*AHR* 88 (1983): 1143. For Turner's being "furious" at the praise which Abraham received at the Harvard colloquium, and on this moving him to circularize historians, see Colin Campbell, "History and Ethics: A Dispute," *New York Times*, 23 December 1984, 19. Copies of Turner's letter to Miriam Brokaw of Princeton University Press, 28 May 1983, and of Turner's circular letters, in my possession.

⁵⁴*AHR* 88 (1983): 1148–49. There was a third participant in the *AHR* exchange, T. W. Mason, author of the original review of Abraham's book which had appeared in the journal. Mason noted other errors by Abraham in reporting and characterizing some individuals' views (errors addressed by Abraham in his reply) but remained convinced that the book was a largely successful effort to "raise the argument to a higher plane of structural analysis . . . at which the motivations and the choices of individuals are secondary in the sense that they are heavily determined by economic and institutional pressures" (p. 1144).

despite "severe reservations about the argument and method," particularly its Marxist concepts and terminology. At the time of the Princeton tenure decision Feldman, whose views were solicited, had recommended against promotion. Privately, Feldman had indicated his complete agreement with Turner's criticisms. After the response to the *AHR* exchange he "went public," or rather semipublic, in widely distributed circular letters attacking Abraham, to which Feldman appended copies of a draft manuscript by his student Ulrich Nocken describing errors in Abraham's book beyond those cited by Turner. Clearly there were additional errors, but what was one to make of them? How were they to be explained and what was their significance in evaluating both the book and its author?⁵⁵

For Feldman and Turner, what was involved was not, properly speaking, error at all, but fraud: a brazen attempt by a dishonest pseudoscholar to hoodwink the academic community through deception and fabrication. They sometimes vacillated on the question of motive, implying that at least in some instances criminal negligence rather than straightforward criminality might have been involved, but throughout they kept returning to the assertion that Abraham had worked with malicious intent. "This is not petty larceny," Turner told an interviewer; "it is the Brink's robbery of German history." Abraham had, Feldman said, "invented" documents, "knowingly lied," and engaged in "a systematic effort to cover up the truth." Feldman held that the "errors" in the book were neither random nor inconsequential; rather they were deliberate, and indispensable to its thesis; if corrected, "they would completely reverse much of its argument." Misstatements were so pervasive, said Feldman, that the book constituted "a veritable menace to scholars." Turner claimed that if the errors were corrected "there is nothing left." Feldman joined Turner in demanding that the book be withdrawn from circulation. Since the book was "not correctible," Feldman said that it would be "unpardonable" for the Princeton University Press to proceed with a projected revised edition, and he threatened reprisals if it went ahead.⁵⁶

⁵⁵Feldman, "Dear Colleagues" circular letters of 28 November 1983 and 26 February 1984, both in my possession. Feldman's charges and Abraham's reply, with rejoinders by each, were eventually published in *Central European History* 17 (June–September 1984): 159–290. The cover date is misleading: the issue in fact appeared in the summer of 1985, a year and a half after the beginning of the widespread informal distribution of the charges. See also Nocken, "Weimarer Geschichte(n)," *Vierteljahrsschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 71 (1984): 505–27, a somewhat toned-down version of the two drafts of the Nocken manuscript distributed earlier, and Abraham, "Business Wars: On Contributions to Weimar Scholarship," *ibid.*, 72 (1985): 329–52.

⁵⁶Feldman, letter to the editor of *The Nation* 240 (1985): 322; Turner, quoted in Karen J. Winkler, "Brouhaha over Historian's Use of Sources Renews Scholars' Interest in Ethics Codes," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 29 (6 February 1985): 9; Feldman circular letters,

Abraham offered a rather different version. There were, he said, numerous errors in his book, more than he had thought at the time of his exchange with Turner, though not nearly so many as was being alleged. He offered a "mundane" explanation.

Much of the research . . . was done during a year-and-a-half stay in Germany while I was a graduate student. While doing that research, I committed the embarrassing and elementary error of hasty and niggardly note taking. The consequence was that my transcriptions sometimes yielded quotations that were elided or not precise. My then practice of sometimes translating and transcribing on the spot served me ill, particularly given my technical competence in German at the time. Worst, over the next several years, going back to my notes, I sometimes mistook summaries of documents for quotations. Such research practices, of course, cannot be defended.

The errors were particularly serious—he in fact termed them "inexcusable"—because historians often use a book not to evaluate its argument but for particular quotations or citations and "there are simply too many errors in my work." Rather than deny his errors, Abraham said, he had not only acknowledged them, but gone on to solicit evidence of error from Turner, and other scholars in the United States and Germany, and revisit all the archival collections, so that they might be corrected in a revised edition. He denied categorically that he had "invented" anything, or that there was anything either deliberate or patterned about the errors. They were the result of carelessness, not deviousness: some helped his argument, some hurt it, most were matters of illustrative detail that neither helped nor hurt. At the very end of his detailed published reply to Feldman's charges he presented, in parallel columns, both the original and the corrected versions of the passages in his book which had been most heavily attacked for "fabrication," "tendentious misquotation," and the like. The device demonstrated that deplorable as the errors were, his argument was sustained at least as well by the corrected as by the original versions. It was a rhetorical tour de force insofar as it showed that there were no rational grounds for him to have deliberately falsified. At the same time, nothing could more infuriate empiricists than this demonstra-

cited in preceding note; Feldman to Miriam Brokaw of Princeton University Press, 20 May 1983 and 24 February 1984, also in my possession. In another letter Feldman warned the Press that if the book were not withdrawn from circulation, "you should know that the request will be repeated by me in very choice company and . . . a further decision to continue marketing the book will be made a matter of public record in what I write." (Quoted in Jonathan Wiener, "Footnotes to History," *Nation* 240 [1985]: 181.)

tion of the relative autonomy of the argument from details of the evidence.⁵⁷

Feldman distributed his circular letters just as Abraham entered the job market, and since "this profession needs to be protected against people like David Abraham," he made a particular target of institutions where Abraham was under consideration. Feldman was "pleased to say I was directly or indirectly involved in stopping four places from hiring Abraham"—the University of Texas at Austin, the University of Tel Aviv, the University of California at Santa Cruz, and Catholic University. The position at Tel Aviv would have involved, in addition to a teaching appointment, responsibility for a research library. This, said Feldman, would have been "like putting Dracula in charge of a blood bank." At Santa Cruz more than two-thirds of the history department wrote to the *AHR* protesting Feldman's "effort to intimidate colleagues" via a campaign of letters and telephone calls, including threats "to go to the Board of Regents, if necessary" to block Abraham's appointment. At Catholic University, where both the department and the dean's committee on tenure and promotion recommended Abraham's appointment, Feldman learned of the prospect only at the last moment, and succeeded in convincing the dean to reject the recommendation. All the members of the Catholic University search committee wrote to the AHA's professional division asking for the establishment of guidelines "to assure fairness to any candidates who might, in the future, be the object of similar campaigns to deny them employment."⁵⁸

There was an unsuccessful attempt, supported though not, Feldman said, initiated by him, to get the University of Chicago to rescind Abraham's Ph.D. This led the university's president, Hanna Holborn Gray, to join with Stanley Katz, Carl Schorske, and others in a protest to the AHA against Feldman's activities. Feldman had greater success in another realm: whether or not his intervention was decisive is impossible to

⁵⁷Abraham, "A Reply to Gerald Feldman," *Central European History* 17 (1984): 183–84, 237–39. At most, as Abraham recognized, the device could refute charges of rationally calculated falsification: "Conspiratorial theories are notoriously impossible to refute, since they can be 'immunized' by the addition of ad hoc hypotheses of 'incompetent dishonesty,' 'supererogatory manipulation,' etc. Ultimately they can only be rejected on grounds of implausibility." (Ibid., 198, n. 44.)

⁵⁸Feldman on protecting the profession, in his circular letter of 27 March 1984, quoted in Abraham, "Reply," 197. Feldman is quoted on his interventions in Winkler, "Brouhaha," 9. Feldman on "Dracula" is quoted in Campbell, "History and Ethics," 19. The letters from Santa Cruz and Catholic University faculty are quoted in Abraham, "Reply," 179–80, n. 5.

tell, but Princeton University Press canceled plans for a revised edition of Abraham's book. Both Feldman and Turner were gratified by the decision of the AHA Council in December 1984 to cancel the inquiry into their activities which had been begun by its professional division, and Feldman cited the council's action as evidence of the propriety of his interventions. The discipline's system of criticizing colleagues, the council said, "works as it should." Above all, Feldman and Turner could take satisfaction in having succeeded in their avowed aim of driving Abraham out of the historical profession. As of 1988 Abraham, then in his early forties, was enrolled in law school.⁵⁹

The dominant themes in the campaign waged by Turner and Feldman were outrage and incredulity. They were outraged that a book containing numerous demonstrated factual errors could be so widely acclaimed; incredulous that few leaders in the profession joined their crusade, and that many even had the temerity to defend Abraham. In the case of Turner the nexus between anti-Marxism and hyperempiricism was manifest. Several years before the Abraham imbroglio he had dismissed Marxist historiography of Germany as unworthy of serious consideration since "almost without exception" it rested on fraudulent scholarship and "egregious misrepresentation of factual information." In his 1985 *German Big Business and the Rise of Hitler* he insisted that "only through gross distortion can big business be accorded . . . even [a] major role in the downfall of the Republic." Those guilty of such distortions were moved by the antibusiness bias endemic to the historical profession; neo-Marxist interpretations were being used "in an effort to discredit and undermine societies with capitalist economies and to legitimize repressive anti-capitalist regimes." He was not unhappy to be labeled "a vulgar factologist." It was through close empirical investigation, rather than "grandiose theories," that the truth about business and politics in Weimar could be known. Feldman, though impatient with Marxist theorizing, was less global in his condemnation of it than Turner, but equally insistent that what mattered most in history was "the facts." He concluded an address at the 1984 meeting of the AHA by quoting from Fogel and Elton on the primacy of evidence over interpretation. Enthusiastically reviewing Turner's long-awaited book in the *American Historical Review*,

⁵⁹The initiative at the University of Chicago and ensuing protest are reported in Wiener, "Footnotes," 181. The AHA Council's decision and Turner and Feldman's satisfaction with it, are reported in Colin Campbell, "Academic Fraud Inquiry Is Dropped," *New York Times*, 3 January 1985, C22. For Feldman's invocation of the AHA Council's action, see his "A Response to Abraham's 'Reply,'" *Central European History* 17 (1984): 247, n. 2. A second, revised edition of Abraham's book was eventually published by Holmes & Meier (New York and London) in late 1986.

he adopted the posture, fashionable among neo-objectivists, of being defiantly "unfashionable":

One can only welcome Turner's explicit and implicit rejection of a pervasive historiographical high fashion and trendiness that encourages airy "interpretations," unverifiable constructs, irrelevant concepts and outright violations of common sense as high intellectual adventure.⁶⁰

Outrage and incredulity were also the characteristic responses of Abraham's defenders. For them what was outrageous was the indefatigable zeal with which Abraham was being pursued, and the irregular procedures employed in that pursuit—procedures which, until it was too late, made it impossible for Abraham's replies to catch up with the accusations. The irregularity of denunciation-by-circular carried out by senior figures, combined with (mostly Feldman) putting his weighty thumb on the scales to prevent a junior historian from finding employment, seemed a classic case of abuse of power. Feldman's procedure, said Stanley Katz, "was calculated not to inform but to intimidate." There was incredulity, mixed with outrage, at Turner's and Feldman's repeated insistence that Abraham had been not just careless but deliberately deceptive. Lawrence Stone found nothing at all unlikely in Abraham's account of the "mundane" source of his errors.

When you work in the archives you're far from home, you're bored, you're in a hurry, you're scribbling like crazy. You're bound to make mistakes. I don't believe any scholar in the Western world has impeccable footnotes. Archival research is a special case of the general messiness of life. NB

⁶⁰Turner, ed., *Reappraisals of Fascism* (New York, 1975), x-xi; Turner, *German Big Business*, 340, 350–51, 356, 357, 359; Feldman, "German Economic History," *Central European History* 19 (1986): 185; Feldman review of Turner, *AHR* 90 (1985): 718. In his review Feldman said the book was "characterized by a careful analysis of . . . sources and a painstaking evaluation of the evidence they provide undertaken by a scholar more interested in getting at the truth they contain than in verifying any preconceived idea or abstract theory" (p. 717). Numerous other reviewers disagreed. Geoffrey G. Field described Turner as "a man with a mission"—to refute the calumnies which leftists had heaped on German business. (*New York Times Book Review*, 27 January 1985, 28.) F. L. Carsten found in the book signs of "special pleading" and failure to even present, let alone deal with, readily available material which contradicted his arguments. (German Historical Institute [London], *Bulletin* 22 [Summer 1986]: 20–23.) In Germany, H.-A. Winkler found Turner's exculpatory verdict contradicted by his own evidence, while Klaus Wernecke charged that documents cited by Turner "say the opposite" of what Turner reported, and that Turner offered "falsified" versions of articles in a probusiness journal, while suppressing other relevant material, in order to misrepresent industrialists' attitude to the Nazis. (Winkler, "Schuldlos am Dritten Reich?" *Die Zeit*, 21 March 1986, 17; Wernecke, "In den Quellen steht zuweilen das Gegenteil," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 17 May 1986, ZB4.)

There was incredulity also at what Carl Schorske termed a sad confusion between "facticity" and historical truth. "When all the errors are corrected, the argument will stand exactly; the historical configuration will not change; the interpretive logic of the book will be upheld." Charles S. Maier, though critical of aspects of Abraham's argument, and deploring its errors, thought it "unwarranted to seek to discredit the book on the basis of these errors." Abraham's stimulating and challenging thesis was, Maier wrote, not ultimately dependent on the sorts of errors his account contained. Thomas Bender thought the attack on Abraham revealed a "gnawing defensiveness" in the profession about the status of history. The incident, he wrote, "in ways I cannot grasp—must be very threatening to make men of considerable intelligence and standing defend publicly the absolute certitude of historical fact, a position both philosophically untenable and historiographically naive."⁶¹

It is difficult to generalize about the response of the profession as a whole to the Abraham affair. Some who had earlier been supporters of Abraham backed off when it turned out that there were more errors in the book than those originally cited by Turner. Others, who had originally been impressed by the charges against Abraham, changed their minds when his full reply appeared in the summer of 1985, too late to do him much good. There was widespread skepticism about the Turner-Feldman vocabulary of "invention" and "fabrication," but at the same time a suspicion within that vast majority of the profession who had not examined the evidence that "where there's smoke there's fire." Some on the historiographical left reflexively leaped to Abraham's support on grounds of ideological solidarity. But there was a larger traditional empiricist group with a predisposition to believe that those with explicit theoretical commitments, and in particular Marxists, were more likely than other historians to play fast and loose with evidence. This in turn was connected with the neo-objectivist conflation of leftism and hyperrelativism, and insofar as Abraham was perceived as part of this undifferentiated and threatening Other, his cause suffered.⁶²

⁶¹Katz and Stone, quoted in Wiener, "Footnotes," 181–82, 180; Schorske on "facticity," quoted in Campbell, "History and Ethics," 19; other remarks from Schorske quoted in Wiener, "Footnotes," 183; Maier, "The Vulnerabilities of Interwar Germany," *Journal of Modern History* 56 (1984): 91; Bender, "Facts and History," *Radical History Review* 32 (1985): 81–82.

⁶²The ideological dimension of the dispute was more salient in Germany than in the United States. In Germany the issue of whether Weimar's collapse (and the rise of Nazism) was the result of structural characteristics of German society or of contingent political events was always highly charged, and was becoming more so as a resurgent conservative historiography tried to provide Germany with a "positive past." To the extent that American historians of Germany were caught up in this dispute, it may have moved them this way or that on the Abraham case.

Professional historians might sympathize with Abraham, but found it awkward and embarrassing to defend one who had confessed to numerous "inexcusable" errors, let alone hire him. Most were upset by the episode and simply wished it would go away. Certainly this was the attitude of the AHA Council, which had another motive as well. "A lot of people felt the reputation of the profession was on the line," said then AHA president, William McNeill. The long *New York Times* story on the Abraham affair appeared on the eve of the council's decision to cancel the investigation into Turner and Feldman's conduct. On its front page the *Times* reported that historians were asking "whether undiscovered errors and serious misquotations may not flaw countless modern works of history," and inside reported the chairman of the University of Texas search committee's opinion that if other works of scholarship were subjected to the same kind of scrutiny, they would exhibit errors like Abraham's. This was a theme reiterated in numerous discussions of the case. Lawrence Stone, for example, reported being told that when a second edition of Sir Lewis Namier's landmark *Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* was being planned, the publishers found "endless, countless, minor errors." In explaining the council's action, AHA officials told the *Times* that the council had been "angered" by suggestions that many works of professional history had errors comparable to Abraham's.⁶³

The trope of synecdoche, in which the part is presented as a microcosm of the whole, is one that the historian is well advised to employ with great caution. It would be overreaching by a long stretch to take the outcome of the Abraham case as emblematic of the dominant historiographical sensibility of the 1980s. It might, as a result of contingent circumstances, have turned out differently, and there were at least as many participants who voiced their hostility to hyperempiricism and neo-objectivism as there were historians who actively or tacitly embraced them, not to speak of those whose responses were governed by other considerations. But it remains true that the "bottom line"—Turner and Feldman triumphant, and Abraham out of the profession—was a striking demonstration of the continued power of the empiricist-objectivist alliance.⁶⁴

There were attempts of various kinds to cope with history's many-

⁶³Campbell, "History and Ethics," 1, 19; Stone, quoted in Wiener, 180; McNeill, quoted in Winkler, 9; Campbell, "AHA Council Declines to Take Up Abraham Case," C22.

⁶⁴Observers both within history and in such adjacent disciplines as anthropology, sociology, and political science agreed that the case would have had a very different outcome in those other fields. While errors would have been censured, not so much would have been made of them, and greater weight would have been put on Abraham's conceptual contribution. Depending on one's point of view, this difference, and its consequences, was the historical discipline's pride or its shame.