about method, theory, and the nature of historical knowledge that frustrate so many of our colleagues. Although the crisis has its political and institutional aspects, which should not be ignored—the expansion of subject matter, the erosion of disciplinary boundaries, the democratization of the academy—its nature is fundamentally epistemological. At its heart lie two issues: the problem of objectivity and the status of the fact.

1. The Problem of Objectivity

In detective stories, the ideal investigator is perfectly objective, incorruptible; he or she does not allow outside forces to influence pursuit of the "facts"; he or she gathers evidence dispassionately, evaluates it rigorously, rejects that which does not "fit," and finally finds out the "truth." In some sense, the typical journalist is imagined to pursue a similar mission—the "true" story, the way it "really" happened. And to do so, this journalist too must be free of biases, personal commitments, entanglements—all the paraphernalia of human life.

That no such objectivity is possible, of course, no researcher should know this better than the professional historian. Ironically, however, there is perhaps no scholarly discipline in the humanities or social sciences in which the goal of pure "objectivity" has been more ardently sought, more obsessively worried over. The careful methods of source criticism we have been discussing in this book were in fact developed explicitly to achieve this goal; they were regarded as the historian's route to objectivity, the method by which he or she sifted out the biases, untruths, and limitations of the information available. Today, we are much more aware that there are no foolproof ways to render the historian nonhuman. First, each historian is a distinct individual, with distinct talents, skills, and resources; each will therefore bring different abilities to the work of research and interpretation. Second, all historians approach their work burdened with an array of individual experiences that affect their reaction to events; they have heard different voices, have different memories, lived through different times. Historians have long known that such differences characterize the people they study; in recent years they have become even more aware of how much in this respect they themselves share with their subjects.

More structural factors play an equally important role in making objectivity an unattainable goal. Every historian occupies a social place that influences not only how the world is seen, but even *what* is seen. Class and all that it entails (education, sense of privilege, fears, ambitions, material resources), political location (party allegiances, political system of the hisian's home country and that country's place in the world), gender, , ethnicity—all these factors determine the historian's capacities as ch as they determine the history of the people he or she is studying. reover, "facts" are themselves rendered "facts" through the lenses such tors create. It is for this reason that historians pay as much attention to way a document or a TV news program is received as they do to what ctually written or said—and for this reason that they, no less than the rage reader or viewer of a TV program, know themselves to be inadeate reporters.

Let us look more systematically at some of the more obvious reasons for difficulties historians face in trying to be objective. First, there is a up of what we might call conscious factors. Censorship is one such fac. In totalitarian regimes, censorship is clearly visible and attempts to be nplete, at least as concerns what are considered matters of state (a deftion that can be very broad indeed). Even in countries where speech is posedly "free," there are limits to anyone's ability to tell all. In many stern countries, the press can be subjected to damage suits for libel if rsonal affairs are too closely reported; in all, the press has to be careful t to alienate the powerful, irritate possible sources, make too many enies. More fundamentally, historians are limited by their own ideolos, their own way of understanding the world. In one sense, we can use term "ideology" simply to mean beliefs consciously held ("I am a pocal conservative," "I am a Christian"), and it is certainly true that such liefs shape an individual's interpretation of events. But in some ways se beliefs are easier to hold at bay when one is trying to be objective an is the entire ideological system in which one is embedded.

In the latter sense, ideology is almost unconscious, very difficult—perps impossible—to retrieve. It is a system of values which inform action, which are thought to inform action—ideas about good and bad, about ht and wrong, about what is "natural" and "given" and what, in const, is "changeable" or "man-made." In this sense, ideology is a product culture—learned, to be sure, but learned at so deep a level that it is not sily distanced. Medieval people, Lucien Febvre was one of the first to monstrate, simply could not imagine a world without god. There was, their ideology, no place, no possibility, for not-god, for atheism. Modn scholars have helped some of us see that fixed categories of gender e also ideological constructions, that in fact there is no coherent, stable oman" or "man" in human history, that any culture's "woman" or an" is an ideological product. That so many people in our own age ve had such trouble even grasping this argument is testimony to its ideogical rootedness.

Given these difficulties, is it possible to achieve anything like objectivity? And if not, then why do history? Many historians (ourselves included) would answer these questions by conceding that "objectivity" is not possible, but they would insist that historical study can, nevertheless, yield useful knowledge. Most of us would explain our position by pointing out that a good historian not only never can but never should achieve the perfectly indifferent stance implied by the word "objectivity." We choose historical topics out of interest, we pursue stories deep into archives because we are fascinated by the event or the people being studied, we privilege some facts over others because we *care.* This does not make us bad historians or make the enterprise of writing history fruitless. It makes us human; and it makes history more art than science, more an act of interpretation than a discovery.

The trick, then, is to construct our interpretations responsibly, with care, and with a high degree of self-consciousness about our disabilities and the disabilities of our sources. First, we must analyze and read our documents meticulously, learning to recognize the kinds of knowledge they produce, learning to see their limits, learning to exploit their possibilities and make use of their biases. These are the skills we have been emphasizing in this book, for they constitute the historian's tool chest; they are the elements of the craft. Second, historians must learn to recognize that they can read sources only from the standpoint of their position—a position, as we have emphasized, that is determined as much by individual attributes as it is by more structural factors. We can never fully escape this standpoint; in some ways we are its prisoners. But we can, nevertheless, write useful histories from that standpoint, if we recognize and scrupulously take account of our likes and dislikes, our biases, and our prejudices. If we can understand or at least acknowledge our ideological position, we can also write histories that self-consciously display those limitations to our readers. We can thus implicate our audiences in the histories we write, making them see *how we see* as well as what we see. If we do so, we can produce useful knowledge about the past, or at least about our access to that past.

2. The Status of the "Fact"

For a Western-trained historian working at the turn of the twenty-first century, there is perhaps no greater threat to the craft than the statement that "there are no facts," that is, no verifiable, indisputable objects of knowledge. Perhaps the only thing that is certain about the arrival of the Pilgrims in New England was that they arrived. Anything else we know