One More Step: An Agreeable Reply to Whaples
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I agree with every word of Robert Whaples’s elegant and well-grounded essay. Whaples doesn’t say things until he has the goods—and as he says, we people from the economic side tend to think of the goods as numbers. It’s very true, as he also says, that our numerical habits have repelled the history-historians, especially since they have in turn drifted further into non-quantitative studies of race, class, and gender (it is amusing that the young economic historian Whaples quotes gets the holy trinity slightly wrong, substituting “ethnicity,” a very old historical interest, for “class,” a reasonably new one; it is less amusing that historians believe they can adequately study race, class, and gender without ever using numbers, beyond pages 1, 2, 3).

But it’s also true, as is shown by the fierce and ignorant quotations he reports from other economists and economic historians, that quantitative social scientists don’t get the point of the humanities. “Whenever I read historians,” said a young economic historian to Whaples, “my response is: How can you say that without a number? Do you have a number?” Many social scientists, and especially those trained as economists, believe adamantly that, as Lord Kelvin put it in 1883, “when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meager and unsatisfactory kind; it may be the beginning of knowledge, but you have scarcely in your thoughts advanced to the state of Science.” The young economists nowadays believe this so fervently that rather than deviating ever from their faith they insist on collecting sometimes quite meaningless numbers (such as what is known as “statistical significance,” or what they are pleased to call “calibrations” in a hypothetical model unbelievable on its face). The economist Frank Knight of the University of Iowa and then of Chicago in the 1930s was standing outside the latter institution’s Social Science Building, on which is inscribed a version of Kelvin’s dictum. Looking up at the inscription he remarked to his companion, “Yes, and when you can measure your knowledge is of a meager and unsatisfactory kind!”

It is worth remembering that Kelvin was as foolishly arrogant about his physics as many modern economists are about their numbers and models: he said for example that “there is nothing new to be discovered in physics now. All that remains is more and more precise measurement.” On the very eve of the discovery of radiation he calculated that Darwin must be wrong because the sun could not be old enough to have burned that long from merely chemical reactions. The economists who laugh at the idea that something might be learned from the past are of the same faith that we are already in possession of the Truth and need not engage in intellectual trade with anyone differently endowed. Said one of Whaples’s faithful, “Why read historians? They do everything backward. They discuss ‘supply’ and ‘demand’ without prices, and speak of needs rather than choices.” A just God will surely punish such sinners for their pride.

Agreeing with Whaples, I can only make here a point beyond his purview. It is: that if humanistically inclined historians and numbers-and-math inclined economists are going to work together on their projects of discovering how society happens—as economics and history themselves suggest they could profitably do—there needs to come into existence a humanistic science of economics. Notice that the phrase does not give up the word “science.” It adds to science the insights to be gained from the humanities. We English speakers should go back to using the word “science” not as “physical and biological inquiries” but in the old and wide sense of “serious and systematic inquiry.”

That is what it means in every language except the English of the past 150 years: thus in Dutch wetenschap, as in kunstwetenschap (“art science,” a recent English impossibility), in German Wissenschaft as in die Geisteswissenschaften (the humanities, literally to a recent English ear a very spooky sounding “spirit sciences”), or in French science as in les sciences humaines (serious and systematic inquiries concerning the human condition, such as studies of literature or philosophy or anthropology, literally “the human sciences,” another impossible contradiction in recent English), or plain “science” in English before 1850 or so. Thus Alexander Pope in 1711 in his poetical “Essay on Criticism”: “While from the bounded level of our mind/Short views we take, nor see the lengths behind:/But more advanced, behold with strange surprise/New distant scenes of endless science rise!” He did not mean physics and chemistry. John Stuart Mill used “science” in its older sense in all his works. Confining the word to “physical and biological science,” sense 5b in the Oxford English Dictionary—an accident of English academic politics in the mid-19th century—has tempted recent speakers of English to labor at the pointless task of demarcating one kind of serious and systematic inquiry from another. Above all, it has set the “scientists” and the humanists at each other’s throats, to the loss of science.

I just finished a book, out in October 2010 from the University of Chicago Press, called Bourgeois Dignity: Why Economics Can’t Explain the Modern World. It shows in detail why the materialist and anti-humanist version of economics, from Marx’s exploitation to Douglass North’s institutional incentives, cannot explain what one of Whaples’s interviewees properly calls “the miracle of modern economic develop-
Economic history faces no more important question, whether asked by economists or by historians, than why industrialization and the reduction of mass poverty first started, and especially why it continued.

How bad are things, really?

It has never been easy to be an economic historian. Much like Jews in their diaspora, they belong simultaneously in many places and nowhere at all. They are perennial minorities, often persecuted, exiled, accustomed to niche existences, surviving by their wits and by (usually) showing solidarity to one another. They must work harder, and know more. They must know both math and foreign languages, and be familiar with MATLAB and archives. They are specialized “economic historians” in one forum, full-time economists (or, more rarely, historians or political scientists) in another. “Be a Jew in your house, a Goy in the street”—this sage advice could just as well be given to economic historians. It is easy for Whaples to find anecdotal evidence of anti-economic history sentiments among economists and historians. Yet again, much like the history of the Jews, while there is plenty of injustice and suffering, and the consequent hand wringing, it is hard to speak of “failure” on an aggregate scale—economic history, by most reasonable criteria, is alive and well.1 It is true that tenure-track jobs are hard to get, but economic historians are still being hired, including...