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Historically Speaking, Volume 11, Number 2, April 2010, pp. 22-23
(Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/hsp.0.0098



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course touch upon economic history, but the marginal status of economic history (and of other fields, such as diplomatic history) is still clear.

³ Philip T. Hoffman, "Opening Our Eyes: History and the Social Sciences," *Journal of the Historical Society* 6 (2006): 93-117.

⁴ Stephen Haber, "Anything Goes: Mexico's 'New' Cultural History," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 79 (1999): 309-330.

⁵ Philip T. Hoffman, Gilles Postel-Vinay, and Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, *Priceless Markets: The Political Economy of Credit in Paris, 1660-1870* (University of Chicago Press, 2000).

⁶ Robert C. Allen, Jean-Pascal Bassino, Debin Ma, Christine Moll-Murata, and Jan Luiten van Zanden, "Wages, Prices, and Living Standards in China, Japan, and Europe, 1738-1925," Global Price and Income History Group Working Paper No. 1, Version: October 2005, available at <http://gpih.ucdavis.edu/Papers.htm> (consulted February 3, 2010).

⁷ Rosenthal and Bin Wong make the argument in a book to be published by Harvard University Press.

⁸ Steven Pincus, *1688: The First Modern Revolution* (Yale University Press, 2009). An interesting review of this book by Joel Mokyr is forthcoming in the *Journal of Economic History*.

ONE MORE STEP: AN AGREEABLE REPLY TO WHAPLES

Deirdre N. McCloskey

I agree with every word of Robert Whaples's elegant and well-grounded essay.¹ 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" of 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



Lord Kelvin, from Andrew Gray, *Lord Kelvin: An Account of His Scientific Life and Work* (J.M. Dent and Company, 1908).

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 devel-

opment.” I found that instead an ethical and rhetorical and ideological and conjective change—just what the unscientific humanists study—made the modern world. If true, the finding would be scientifically important. The Victorian travel writer and skeptic Alexander Kinglake suggested that every church should bear on its front door a large sign, “Important If True.” So here. 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. The continuation made us richer and freer and more capable of human achievement than our ancestors. The latest continuation—located most spectacularly in China and India, of all surprising places—shows that the whole world can be so. It shows, in case you doubted it, that Europe was not special in genetics. It shows that in a world of innovation the curse of Malthus lacks force.

The relevance for the war between economists and historians is this: if ideas and ethics and “rhetoric” (that is, democratic persuasion) contributed largely to such a happy result, then perhaps we should point our social telescopes also toward ideas and ethics and rhetoric. Looking fixedly at trade or imperialism or demography or unions or property law—very interesting though all of them are—will not do the whole of the scientific job. Ideas are the dark matter of history, ignored between 1890-1980. In those days we were all historical materialists. Even the historians were (thus in 1913, for example, Beard’s *An Economic Interpretation of the American Constitution*), and the economists have never gotten over it. When anyone suggests that ideas such as those of the Enlighten-

ment might have had a real effect, as Joel Mokyr has eloquently argued, the economists get *angry*. You can always tell when you are stepping on someone’s ill-considered faith, such as in “statistical” significance or the ideology of materialism, by their fury in reaction.

To be able to detect the dark matter of ideas we will need a new, more idea-oriented economics, which would admit for example that language shapes an economy. For such a humanistic science of economics the methods of the human sciences would become as scientifically relevant as the methods of

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mathematics and statistics now properly are. It would carry out the promise of an economic science such as practiced, sometimes, by Alexander Gerschenkron, Albert Hirschman, Robert Solow, Moses Abramovitz, Stanley Lebergott, and George Akerlof, which uses all the evidence. Such a widened economic science would scrutinize literary texts *and* simulate on computers, analyze stories *and* model maxima, clarify with philosophy *and* measure with statistics, inquire into the meaning of the sacred *and* lay out the accounting of the profane. The practitioners of the humanities and the social sciences would stop sneering at each other, and would start reading each other’s books and auditing each other’s

courses. As their colleagues in the physical and biological sciences so naturally do, they would get down to cooperating for the scientific task. It is not very difficult, as one can see in the education of graduate students. A bright humanist can learn enough mathematics and statistics in a couple of years to follow their uses in economics. A bright economist, with rather more difficulty, can in a couple of years learn enough about rhetoric and close reading to follow their uses in the English department. What prevents such scientific cooperation is sneering ignorance, not the difficulty of the task.

When that happens we will have a fully scientific economics, which will be able to learn from history, and economists will again hire people who are not vague about when the American Civil War began. As long as economics embodies the naively anti-humanistic convictions of 1920s logical positivism, as it now certainly does, the historians and the economists are going to be mutually repelled, like the magnets that Kelvin studied. Let us pray for the rise of common sense, against prideful ignorance.

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¹ I thank John Lyons of Miami University (Ohio) for his very helpful comments on a draft.

ON THE SUPPOSED DECLINE AND FALL OF ECONOMIC HISTORY

Joel Mokyr

Much like the West, the field of economic history has experienced endless lamentations of its imminent decline and fall. Whaples’s basic argument that economic historians as a group are disrespected by economists and feared and despised by historians is typical of this kind of premature eulogy. The Cliometric Revolution had all been so promising back in the 1970s, and now all we are good for is telling a few stories about past economic crises to entertain our fellow economists or supply them with a telling historical anecdote to decorate the first paragraph of some technical paper.

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