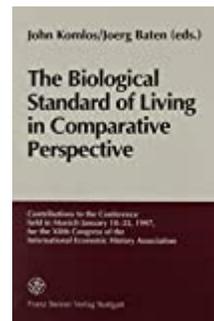


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



John Komlos, Jvrg Baten, eds. *The Biological Standard of Living in Comparative Perspective*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1998. 528 pp. \$89.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-515-07220-5.



Reviewed by John E. Murray (Department of Economics, University of Toledo)

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This book is a collection of conference proceedings, or rather pre-conference proceedings, since it gathers together papers that would have been presented at an A session of the ill-fated Seville/Madrid IEHA meetings in 1998. The session (which was organized by John Komlos and Sebastian Coll) and book are devoted to reporting a variety of studies in anthropometric history, that is, the analysis primarily of human height as measured in large samples, but also weight in those rare cases when it is available. The essays number twenty-eight in total, followed by a brief summary by the editors who were also the session organizers.

Geographical coverage is positively sprawling, with notable papers on heights in China (by Stephen Morgan), Argentina (by Ricardo Salvatore and Jvrg Baten) and Korea (by Insong Gill). Individual studies appear on nearly every European country. Height and body mass index (weight adjusted for height) in Australia are examined by Stephen Nicholas, Robert Gregory, and Sue Kimberley; and there are no fewer than five essays on heights of Federal soldiers in the American Civil War. Two papers combine height data from several different countries to synthesize a broader yet coherent story, Henk-Jan Brinkman and J.W. Drukker on developing countries today and Sebastian Coll on four European nations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Modes of analysis are catholic. Most papers are by economic historians who generally employ tried and true techniques of statistical regression analysis on data recovered from written manuscripts. They dutifully report the results of regressions with those tiny R-squareds that vex the non-cognoscenti. But not only that: nearly every paper in this style presents data in pictorial format, for example, distribution frequencies of heights, growth by age curves, and time trends in final adult height. One need not be able to read a table of regression results to learn plenty about the state of the anthropometric art from this volume. In addition, two essays present findings of physical anthropologists. Jesper Boldsen and Jes Sxgaard estimate Danish heights from bones that date from as far back as 1100 A.D. Barry Bogin and Ryan Keep consider bones that are some eight millennia old in Mesoamerica. In short, the range of contributions reflects how international and interdisciplinary the anthropometric history research project has become.

In general, as might be expected, the authors are optimistic that the study of height and other anthropometric data can illuminate issues of human welfare in the past. To the editors' credit, they include two papers that might be described as anthropo-skeptical. One, by Robert McGuire and Philip Coelho, urges the disease factor in the height = gross nutrition - disease - workload equation

be given more emphasis. The other by Sally Horrocks and David Smith is a postmodern take on the “social processes of science” which despite the now-standard use of “privilege” as a verb offers constructive suggestions for linking more data-driven anthropometric history with the institutional histories of the data generating sources.

As is common among volumes of conference proceedings, the virtues of the genre are its vices. The organizers have edited the volume lightly, leading to an odd combination of intense concentration on a few issues and a collection of other papers that almost seem to have walked in from a different conference. For example, in two separate and most intriguing papers Michael Haines (in one) and Lee Craig and Thomas Weiss (in the other) examine the relationship between local agricultural output and stature among American Civil War soldiers. The results do not exactly coincide as Craig and Weiss find a much stronger relationship than does Haines. The interested reader would like to see these papers in dialog. At the same time, the geographic and chronological coverage is mind-boggling. It is hard to imagine many other concepts that can be fruitfully applied to humans from so

many different times and places.

The book may not be easy to find; for example, I could not locate it on Amazon.com’s website. You may need to order it directly from the publisher. (Their email address is service@steiner-verlag.de. Their URL is www.steiner-verlag.de.) This volume would make a very good addition to academic libraries, where students and scholars of economic history, world history, physical anthropology, and economic development can see where this particular research strategy stands at present. The freshness of this volume embodies the current state of the anthropometric research project, which might make it an optimal venue to inform the scholarly reading public of its findings. Scholars of many periods, regions, and disciplines are analyzing and reporting anthropometrica. Let a hundred flowers bloom.

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