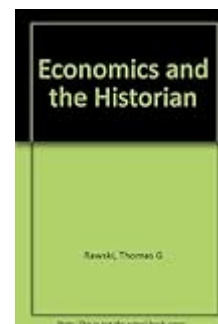


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Thomas G. Rawski, ed. *Economics and the Historian*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. xiv + 297 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-07269-5; \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-07268-8.



Reviewed by Michael Dintenfass (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee)

Published on EH.Net (September, 1996)

This volume brings together eight accomplished “economists with long experience of studying historical problems and working collaboratively with historians” (pp. 13-14) for the “specific purpose” of showing historians “how to apply the core ideas and methods of economics to a wide range of historical issues” (p. 1). Donald N. McCloskey offers the non-economic historian a brilliant introduction to the economics of choice, while Susan B. Carter and Stephen Cullenberg construct a dialogue between Clio and Hades in order to highlight the historical possibilities of labor economics. Jon S. Cohen guides the uninitiated into the institutional economics of households, farms, and firms, and Richard Sutch, Hugh Rockoff, and Peter H. Lindert do the same for macroeconomics, money, banking, and inflation, and international trade, respectively. Thomas G. Rawski opens the collection with a brief discussion of markets and a more extensive chapter on economic trends.

All eight of the essays assembled in this book are of an exceptionally high quality. At once marvelously lucid and richly informative, they reveal to great effect the “new economic history” in its maturity. Rarely has the sheer aesthetic beauty of the “logic of self interest” (p. 5) been better displayed for the sake of the non-economic historian. Nowhere is there a single volume that better captures the power of economic analysis to illuminate the

most diverse historical phenomena: the fate of traditional junk transport in modern China, the triumph and persistence of the QWERTY typewriter keyboard, and the aversion of North African peasants to high-yield strains of wheat.

Nevertheless, *Economics and the Historian* is not the success that its cast of learned, imaginative, and articulate contributors might have achieved. In part, this is because of the limits they have imposed on themselves in introducing economics to historians. In part, it is the result of the implicit assumption about the current practice of history that governs their project.

The chapters of this volume are filled with many wonderful examples of how the pursuit of self-interest worked at different times and places in the past. Carter and Cullenberg, for example, trace the wasteful practices of American farmers before 1850 to the abundance of land. Cohen explains the attractiveness of sharecropping to landowners and freed slaves alike in the postbellum South. Rawski shows why tobacco cultivation appealed to northern Chinese farmers despite the small hourly or daily earnings that it yielded.

At the same time, the authors of this book maintain an almost total veil of silence over the quantitative techniques that economists use both to capture the self-

interested behavior of people in the past and to assess their own applications of the logic of self-interest. "Correlation coefficients, regression lines, and t-statistics," the meat and potatoes of the actual practice of economic history, appear only in a brief note on statistics in the "Suggestions for Readings and How to Approach Them" at the end of the book (pp. 239-40). The historian who thus turned with excitement from *Economics and the Historian* to the *Journal of Economic History* or *Explorations in Economic History* would hardly be able to follow the conversations conducted there, let alone participate in them.

By the same token, even those "economists who specialize in economic history" (p. xiii) would find much that is published now in the *American Historical Review* or the *Journal of Modern History* something of a shock. Whereas fifteen years ago social history, with its structuralist and materialist inflections, was in the ascendant, it is a linguistically inspired cultural history that today enjoys Clio's favor. The concern with movements, forces, and conditions has given way to a preoccupation with identities, memories, and representations as the making of the self has claimed priority over the prosecution of its interests.

The premise on which Rawski and his colleagues proceed, however, is that the gap between history and economics is merely a problem of accessibility. Economists express their fundamental concepts in what is essentially a foreign language, and their prose is too often "infelicitous" (p. 4). By translating the vocabulary of supply

and demand and markets and equilibria into ordinary English and recasting the arguments of economics in prose rather than equations, the contributors to *Economics and the Historian* aim to make the "dismal science" hospitable to historians. Sadly, they fail to recognize that the concerns of many historians nowadays are far removed from those of economists and that speaking in a language historians can understand will not be enough to inspire a substantive dialogue between them.

Economics and the Historian, then, invites historians to discuss matters that no longer interest them deeply, and it fails to equip them adequately for the exchange. As a result, it may well prove a book with a very narrow market. Those most excited by its contents are quite likely to possess already something of the expertise it makes available. Those without this expertise are by and large already engaged in historical inquiries that demand a mastery of very different languages and analytical practices. If economic historians are successfully to engage non-economic historians in constructive conversations about the past, they will have to familiarize themselves more with where history has gone while the cliometric revolution was running its course than Rawski and company have chosen to do.

Copyright (c) 1996 by EH.Net and H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://eh.net/>

Citation: Michael Dintenfuss. Review of Rawski, Thomas G., ed., *Economics and the Historian*. EH.Net, H-Net Reviews. September, 1996.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=580>

Copyright © 1996, EH.Net and H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission questions, please contact the EH.NET Administrator (administrator@eh.net; Telephone: 513-529-2850; Fax: 513-529-3309). Published by EH.NET.