

Letter from a Historian: History and Science, History as Science: Simplification, Modeling and Humility

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I would like to open by thanking the editors and contributors of this issue of the *Chicago Journal of History* for their dedication to our shared endeavor. Historical research is a creative as well as a scientific endeavor. In writing thus, I intend no slight to scientists! I want only to draw attention to the issue that the profession of history has no clear guidelines and few norms regarding many issues related to the writing of history or crafting of historical argument—concerning narrative form, rules of evidence, models of causation, and so forth—that would in other disciplines be subject to settled if contestable convention. For this reason, among others, writing history is hard, and publishing a journal is a means not only to disseminate scholarship but also to celebrate it. In what follows, as a gesture of respect to the *Journal*, I celebrate features of historical research with which I wrestle, and which are therefore both challenging and dear to me.

Virtually all academic inquiry requires acts of simplification. Two types of such acts can illustrate what I mean. In some cases, this occurs when we select a single text or image for explication. Of course, we almost invariably study such items as instances of a type or as intelligible within some context of production or reception. Whatever the approach, study at this level invariably involves the isolation of certain factors as relevant to interpretation and understanding, and other things that we know, as it were, about the relevant contexts are deemed irrelevant and so often not named.

Other acts of analysis, particularly those that study large numbers of instances, require acts of simplification on at least two levels. First, in order to render the experiences and actions of many individuals susceptible to aggregation, complex factors of every conceivable kind—environmental, contextual, sensory, emotional, linguistic, political, social, economic—must be translated into similar terms, and often into numbers. The violently metaphorical nature of this process cannot be overemphasized: there is little reason to believe that human feelings or human self-understandings are naturally expressed numerically, or that humans deliberate in numbers. (These issues have recently been the subject of some splendid work, of which I single out that by Peter Spiegler and Sally Engle Merry as particularly inspiring for me.) Second, in order for the experiences of those many individuals to appear similar enough to be comparable—to make it useful and permissible to analyze them in the same way—one must design a model of

the phenomena under study. The purpose of modeling is to identify certain factors as causally and hermeneutically salient and push all others into the background, bracketed, as it were, after the form of *ceteris paribus* assumptions. But there is of course a quite fundamental sense in which it is the viewing of situations through the lens of such models that makes them appear similar in the first place.

The result of all this translation and simplification is that vast areas of human experience are rendered susceptible to manipulation via mathematical operations, and of course great insight is thereby gained at a descriptive, historical and analytic level. I want to advance two claims about historical and humanistic research in this context. To clarify what is at stake, I want to contrast historical and humanistic forms of inquiry with others, which use such insights into past and present to claim predictive power. What makes the results of one's method not simply descriptive, but normative? When does history become destiny?

The issue is complicated, and as with all complicated issues, many answers will capture some of the truth, and only a complex answer will do the problem justice. In the present context, it is perhaps sufficient to say that the power of such representations in the world of ideas and politics rests in part on our tendency to grant prestige and power to mathematics. For it is by means of quantitative analysis above all that patterns in data of this kind are not simply discerned, but extrapolated into the future. What I wish to stress is the twofold problem that such representations of society are both alien to how humans think—they are, as I have stressed, translations, and fully as problematic, but also as necessary, as all translations. Mathematical representations of social phenomena are also simplifications. This grants them a kind of clarity, but clarity of this kind should not be mistaken for normative power. I need hardly stress that modeling a complex future on the basis of a simple representation of the past is hardly a recipe for success.

By contrast, it is a hallmark both for well and ill that the rules of evidence in history—and perhaps many areas of the humanities—are both ill-defined and always contested. For example, in historical research, in many domains the aggregation of instances requires wrestling with varied forms of discourse analysis and historical semantics. One cannot simply count words from place to place and time to time. What is more, in many forms of historical inquiry, what counts as evidence

and what satisfies as explanation are questions to be debated afresh at each instance. This undoubtedly contributes to the perception that historical and humanistic inquiry is not quite “scientific.” But one might redescribe this problem, if problem it is, as issuing from the tendency of humanistic inquiry to commence from capacious understandings of the world and to take first-order products of human culture as their units of analysis. In other words, historical inquiry starts by accepting the world in all its complexity, and performs purely contingent acts of simplification. What is more, the more complex one’s object of study—and, crucially, the more comprehensively one models it—the more particularist become one’s results, and the harder it becomes to draw normative conclusions from them.

In short, at their best, history and the humanities practice a kind of epistemic humility, which results, I suspect, from inner tendencies toward curiosity and self-critique, and perhaps many other causes. In the contemporary landscape, in which the knowledge sciences are assessed according to a narrowly instrumentalist calculus, history and the humanities in general pay a very dear price for this bravery, namely, a potent loss in social prestige. A first step toward redressing this situation might be a clear-eyed understanding of what the problem is.

A final word, lest these remarks be taken as a counsel of despair! In my view, the practice of history is not simply hard or creative in the terms that I adumbrated at the start of this letter. It is also frequently expressive of real intellectual virtues. For one thing, history practices a sort of Aristotelian empiricism, in elaborating its theoretical constructs from the data themselves, and worrying about whether those constructs suit the problem at hand. For another, historical inquiry exhibits a deep epistemic humility concerning the power of its results. The past might enable a project of critique, telling us things about the sort of future we’d like to have; and perhaps a proper understanding of the past might help to bring one of those futures about. But those and many other projects will be more successful, the more we honor the limits of what historical inquiry can reveal and what historical knowledge itself can be. That project alone is hard enough.

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