

Francesco Boldizzoni, *The Poverty of Clío: Resurrecting Economic History* (2012), xi + 216 (Princeton University Press, Princeton, £27.95/\$39.50).

Francesco Boldizzoni does not like cliometrics. This much the title of his book makes clear. His principal objection is that it examines the economic past only through such numerical data as can be extracted (by others) from the sources or synthesized from bits and pieces of information and the application of models taken from neoclassical economics, especially as those are devised in the Anglophone academy. He categorically denies the assumption, which he sees as basic to cliometrics, that the laws of neoclassical economics -- based on rational choice and maximization operating in well-developed markets -- can apply to societies other than those of the capitalist West in the modern era. Instead, he sees the workings of economies as determined by social, political, and cultural conditions specific to each society and time period. Parallel to this view, he asserts the primacy of inductive as opposed to deductive reasoning in building explanatory schemes for historical research. Finally, on those historians whose methods he deems sufficiently inductive, and whose findings he deems sympathetic to the mores of past societies, he confers the label 'authentically moralistic', suggesting perhaps that the cliometricians are not just wrong, but lacking in moral fiber as well (p. 67).

In Boldizzoni's characterization, the assumptions and methods behind the cliometric approach are not just a convenient excuse for the ignorance of context, but also the instruments of a perverse kind of intellectual hegemony. Indeed, the way he sees it, the cliometrician's aim is more to demonstrate the superiority of economic theory and econometrics over 'softer' social science than to elucidate any aspect of actual history. As William Parker, himself a cliometric pioneer, once said: it amounts to

showing that ‘the market did it again’.¹ This reproach, by the way, applies at least as much to the New Institutional type of economic history as to the more explicitly econometric work of the earlier practitioners. Economic imperialism also has an ideological dimension, of course. Not only has the market been at work since time immemorial, but economic progress is due mostly to removing the fetters that kept it from functioning at full capacity, foremost among these the lack of well-defined, far-reaching, and secure property rights.

Now many of the criticisms Boldizzoni levels at cliometrics, though often reductionist, are not new, nor are they without merit. They have been part of the discourse in economic history since the beginning of the movement. Indeed, the Nobel Prize winning economist Robert Solow worried nearly thirty years ago already that ‘economic theory [would] learn nothing from economic history’ and that economic history in turn would be ‘as much corrupted as enriched by economic theory’.² Moreover, it is reasonable to believe that scholars trained as economists and employed in departments of economics have embraced cliometrics not only because it was congenial to their training but also to be in good standing with influential colleagues who viewed economic history as suspiciously lacking in rigor. An earlier practitioner of the history of economic growth, the Marxist Paul Baran, used to say that neoclassical economics looks for exact answers to small and not overly interesting questions. Deirdre McCloskey has argued this point more forcefully than perhaps anyone else across numerous publications, yet this work merits no mention here.³ Fortunately though, the characterization of small-mindedness does not actually apply to the recent revival of interest in the onset of modern economic growth in the West, for which Boldizzoni reserves some of his sharpest criticism. Still, it is refreshing to

¹ Reported in J. Mokyr’s review on EH.Net of J. W. Drukker, *The Revolution that Bit its Own Tail: How Economic History Changed our Ideas on Economic Growth*. Amsterdam: Aksant, 2006, and cited in the present book.

² From a talk first presented at the 1984 meetings of the American Economics Association and published in, “Economics: Is Something Missing?” in William Parker, *Economic History and the Modern Economist*, Basil Blackwell, 1986: 21.

³ The theme of the small-mindedness that lies behind many economic applications of statistical significance is a recurrent one in McCloskey’s work. For an excellent summary of her position see in particular, *The Vices of Economists; The Virtues of the Bourgeoisie*, Amsterdam University Press, 1997.

read someone who appreciates certain earlier and alternative traditions, such as the work of the *Annales* School and even the old German historical school typified by Werner Sombart.

The problem with this book is that its sometimes reasonable and even accurate critique of cliometrics (broadly defined) is marred by a pervasive and almost personal anti-Americanism. Now this too goes back a long way in the culture of European intellectuals, but one rather thought it had been put to bed alongside reflexive Marxism. For Boldizzoni, cliometrics is more than just bad. It is a poison that threatens to infect and destroy economic history on the other side of the Atlantic, where cliometric scholarship is increasingly practiced and appreciated. What he does not say but could, is that the almost total domination of the English language in scholarly discourse, as well as the preponderance of Anglophone universities among the global elite of institutions, probably give their scholars disproportionate influence.

A few examples will show that the accusation of bias is not merely a defensive move on the part of this reviewer, situated as I am in an American department of history. Boldizzoni extends his criticisms beyond the narrow circle of cliometricians to include respected (American) historians whom one can hardly accuse of ignoring the context of their object of study. Joel Mokyr and Jan de Vries, who both garner serious criticism in this book, have in fact written widely and deeply about the impact of ideas and values on processes of economic and social change. Boldizzoni also sins by omission. The works cited approvingly are (as he admits) almost all European. But why ignore or dismiss with a quip such scholars as David Landes, or Deirdre McCloskey if one wants to highlight the role of culture in economic development? Or, to take another example, why cite the European study led by Richard Bonney on the positive role of the state in economic development and ignore completely the carefully nuanced work of Peter Lindert on the same subject? Boldizzoni's book offers us an impassioned plea for good (virtuous even) scholarship, but surely such a standard must be applied reflexively. What can possibly be the

scholarly value in fabricating a quote (complete with quote marks to set it off from the author's own voice) attributed to a hypothetical practitioner of the cliometric (dark) arts, which is then denounced for both its content and logic (p. 34). This kind of argument seems to me irresponsible at best, and at worst a cheap rhetorical trick.

It is ironic that Boldizzoni calls for social science history (SSH) to come and rescue the field from the evils of cliometrics, since the European institutionalization of SSH is so clearly modeled on the American Social Science History Association, active since the mid-1970s. One can, of course, question whether this model does very much to counter the natural silo shape of scholarly discourse, particularly since the meetings of both groups must constantly struggle to promote the mixing of disciplines. Working against them is the understandable difficulty involved for any scholar to venture too far beyond her or his established area of expertise. The other leg on which his positive agenda rests is the holding-up (one might go so far as to say the reification) of the inductive method as a way to re-anchor economic history in the solid field of 'value-free' facts (p. 82). Yet one is reminded in this regard of the Nobel Prize-winning biologist Sir Peter Medewar's famous essay titled 'Is the Scientific Paper a Fraud', in which he effectively puts to rest any expectation that human inquiry of whatever kind can ever base itself entirely, or even primarily, on the observation of evidence acquired without some prior reliance on theory.⁴

It is generally true on both sides of the Atlantic that the fuss over cliometrics has died down. For one thing, Boldizzoni ignores the large portion of economic history in America that was not mainly cliometric all along, although it is true that cliometric work generally received the most attention. Good scholars, now as before, use quantitative techniques, from statistical regression to GIS, to complement historical materials and help organize them into a cogent argument, not to disguise ignorance or worse, ill-

⁴ Peter Medewar, "Is the Scientific Paper a Fraud?" *The Threat And The Glory : Reflections On Science And Scientists*. HarperCollins, 1990.

intentioned agendas. And even cliometricians are encouraged by good critics and editors to translate their assumptions, techniques, and findings into intelligible prose. Having said that, it remains hopeful that academic departments of both economics and history are now gradually turning away from the methodological exaggerations of the recent past and moving toward more common ground. Despite its admirable call for economic (but I would add all) historians to pursue the highest standards of best practice, this book will not be of much help in pushing the process along.

Anne EC McCants

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

1393 words

MIT OpenCourseWare
<https://ocw.mit.edu>

21H.383 / 21H.982 Technology and the Global Economy, 1000-2000
Fall 2016

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <https://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.