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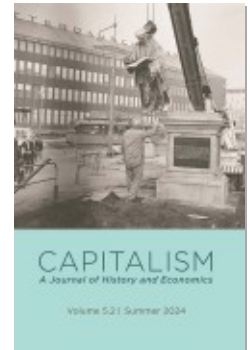
## Learning from the Other Side

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## Learning from the Other Side

**WE HEAR A LOT ABOUT** interdisciplinarity and its supposed virtues. We hear less about how to make it work on an everyday basis. What follows are some ruminations from two scholars who spent many years working together in an interdisciplinary economic history program.<sup>1</sup> Given the many academic disciplines and subdisciplines that exist, “interdisciplinary” can imply a multitude of combinations. We focus on what might be the broadest divide relevant to this journal: economic history as done by economists in economics departments, and economic history as done by historians in history departments. The two parent disciplines span a large intellectual gulf, one of the largest possible. Sometimes discussions of interdisciplinarity pertain to economists in conversation with political scientists, or to literature scholars in conversation with philosophers. These interactions involve their own challenges and rewards, but when the disciplines in question share fundamental ideas about knowledge, these conversations seem easier, at least to an outsider.

We start with a simple observation that can spare unnecessary grief. Disciplines and departments develop their own norms and procedures for the simple routines of academic life. These protocols have nothing to do, in principle, with the ideas and approaches of a discipline, but they are baked into university life. Often support staff enforces those norms without fully appreciating how much they are department-specific. Some misunderstandings reflect differences in the way departments do things, differences that are as fruitless to challenge as they can be hard to understand. Consider an invitation to present a paper at a seminar or conference. Economics departments tend to be less formal about arrangements and have speaking formats that are foreign to those in other departments. Invitations from history

<sup>1</sup> The two authors overlapped at Yale University from January 2004 to June 2018. Timothy Guinnane taught in the Department of Economics, Francesca Trivellato in the Department of History. In 2010, they were joined by Naomi Lamoreaux. The Program in Economic History at Yale is housed in the Department of Economics. In those years, it hosted a weekly public workshop and a weekly closed-door seminar for doctoral students from Economics and History, with occasional participants from Political Science, Sociology, the Law School, the School of Management, and other programs.

departments generally come further in advance and as part of a conference or a thematically unified seminar series. Unwritten rules can extend to travel arrangements, expectations of on-campus interactions with local faculty and students, and other matters. Someone invited for the first time to a conference hosted by a different discipline may face an unfamiliar set of expectations. It is important to read the invitation email to see what the hosts expect and to ask questions if something seems unclear, surprising, or missing. Departments cannot ordinarily adjust a format or procedure for a single scholar and, in our experience, the differences do not impose onerous burdens on anyone of a cheerful disposition. Complaining about something not working “the way it should,” meaning “the way my discipline does it,” is pointless.

Inequality in financial resources available to different units within a university also plays an important role in what seem like disciplinary differences. Economists in Arts and Sciences faculties often complain about salaries and research funds in business or law schools, but most such complainers earn more and have more financial support for their programmatic activities than anyone in a history department. Successful interdisciplinary cooperation requires sensitivity about these inequalities; the economics approach to seminars and conferences surely has something to do with funding.

The substantive challenges to interdisciplinarity are harder to overcome. They are inseparable from interpersonal interactions and full awareness of the other discipline’s internal struggles. To be useful, conversations between historians and economists have to focus on the best possible version of the other discipline. That version may not be embodied in many actual, living scholars, but it is the only one worth thinking about as a point of reference. There are many bad economists and many bad historians; caricaturing a discipline on the basis of bad examples is both lazy and useless. This observation has a simple but crucial corollary: often the exemplar that annoys outsiders has critics in the home discipline as well. A notable example is Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman’s 1974 *Time on the Cross*. That work justifiably raised hackles among historians. The discussion of this book would have taken a different course had the historians appreciated that many economic historians in economics departments also found the work badly wanting. Some aspects of the economists’ criticisms differed in important ways from those stressed by historians. Fogel and Engerman, for example, claimed that the slave system was “efficient” in ways that deployed the idea of “efficiency” in a new and, to economists, puzzling way. The idea of efficiency in this context appalled some outside of economics, and they might not have appreciated

that economists objected to the same idea, if for different reasons. Other reservations voiced by economic historians boil down to the idea that Fogel and Engerman misused evidence. In this and other respects, the historians' and economists' critiques were worded differently but had much in common, reinforcing one another.<sup>2</sup>

We need to accept that often we do not understand the premises and reasoning of another discipline and, worse, we often do not understand what we do not understand. Misunderstandings occur on different levels. One is simply a matter of vocabulary. More than once, we have heard a doctoral student using a phrase picked up from another discipline but without any real appreciation of its meanings. For example, the economics students thought "discourse" was a synonym for "conversation."<sup>3</sup> The history students used terms like "econometrician" to mean something entirely different from what it means in economics.<sup>4</sup> There is, of course, a deeper aspect to this problem. Economists complain that scholars from other disciplines claim "economists think X" when virtually nobody in the field actually thinks X. An example: huge parts of economics today deal with the implications of uncertainty and imperfect information. Yet one habitually hears the claim that economics assumes that everyone has perfect knowledge. This misperception has several sources, including the difficulty of acquiring a thorough grounding in economics without doing a lot of math.

The problem also has its reverse. Historians draw on research methods and a theoretical apparatus that, because it is not written out in equations, seems, to economists, commonsensical. It is not. Understanding a scholar from another discipline is an exercise in humility and requires basic education in their apparatus. Methodological heterogeneity in history can generate the erroneous impression that "anyone can do history." A former dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Yale once irritated the attendees at a reception for incoming history graduate students when, in

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., David and Temin, "Capitalist Masters, Bourgeois Slaves"; Sutch, "Breeding of Slaves"; Wright, "Efficiency of Slavery." Hilt, "Revisiting," provides a retrospective and many additional references.

<sup>3</sup> Historians and humanists use "discourse" in the sense attributed to it by Michel Foucault: a historically contingent structure of knowledge that is conditioned by and, in turns, conditions power relations (*Archaeology of Knowledge* and "Order of Discourse"). While this usage has become commonplace, poststructuralist and postmodern thought never took over history departments, contrary to what is often assumed by economists.

<sup>4</sup> In an economics department, an "econometrician" is someone who specializes in the development of statistical tools to address economic questions. Sometimes the term "applied econometrician" is used to indicate the users of such tools. It does not mean "an economist who uses math."

an awkward attempt to be empathetic, he announced that after retiring he would also become a historian. By this he meant that he intended to start opening the boxes of papers accumulated by his parents in their basement. The dean may not have recognized that a great deal of economic history published in economics journals today reflects the same dilettantish view of the historian's task.

Perhaps the biggest challenge arises when someone finds puzzling a phenomenon that seems perfectly obvious to a colleague from another discipline. A history doctoral student once presented a paper on the steel industry in the first decades of the twentieth century. He seemed baffled by the fact that Europe's steel-producing countries both demanded tariff protection from their home governments and sold a lot of their output overseas. The pattern does seem odd: if the Germans can produce at prices that are attractive to Brazilians, why do they need tariff protection in Germany? The answer may be simple greed, but the phenomenon is more general and reflects well-understood economics.<sup>5</sup> For the economists in the room, this kind of discussion poses several problems. One is of courtesy: it would be simple, and too common, for an economist to say "that's obvious" and rattle off an argument that would mean nothing to the history student.

In our group, the opposite happened even more frequently. Whenever an economics graduate student outlined their sources, students from history bombarded them with questions about the power dynamics that had led to the construction of the archives. This is another lost opportunity. Once again, there is common ground: historians consider under the rubric of "source criticism" versions of what economists call selection bias.<sup>6</sup> Economists could often do better by thinking harder about their sources. Conversely, historians could profit from thinking about new ways to use biased and incomplete sources, a focus of the economics profession for some time. These discussions work best when the participants start from the questions they share and acknowledge their respective ways of answering them.

<sup>5</sup> Tariff protection allows the German (for example) firm to charge two sets of prices to two different types of customers. They charge a high price in Germany; the tariff protects them from foreign imports, and cartels often deterred German steel producers from undercutting one another in the German market. Overseas, they charge a low price because they face competition from firms elsewhere. Steel production has a cost structure that supports this approach: the cost of producing each additional unit typically declines for a wide range of output levels, making it possible to charge lower prices for exports.

<sup>6</sup> See Guinnane, "Sample-Selection Bias," in this issue.

At its worst, this not understanding what one does not understand leads to two distinct barriers to communication, and thus knowledge. One is to assume that if another discipline has an analytical apparatus and vocabulary that one does not grasp easily, the underlying motive is an effort to obfuscate. Economics seems vulnerable to this charge because of the role of mathematics in the discipline. For their part, historians have their own jargon and inside baseball. The second barrier that arises reflects a tendency for humans to ascribe malign motives to what we do not understand, and thus to evaluate ideas based on ascribed political or personal motivations.

Another important lesson is to recognize that we all have ideas about what matters in research. Some of those ideas come from our disciplinary training, and some reflect the core ways of thinking that probably influenced our decisions to become economists or historians or something else. If most historians posit that power dynamics trump all rationality, economists can go too far in the opposite direction. Diversity is a good thing, and these differences in what matters need not turn into contempt. In our experience, economists tolerate weaker evidence if the argument is clear. In contrast, historians tend to stress problems of evidence and prose while worrying less about theoretical rigor, however stated. Nothing about this divergence of core concerns needs to imply dismissiveness. In fact, it even suggests that when someone is engaged in work that goes against their own disciplinary grain (an economist talking about evidence or a historian stressing the argument over the evidence), they are, potentially, at their most interesting.

Swimming against one's own institutional and intellectual disciplinary tide entails both risks and benefits. The leading academic publications in each discipline police the boundaries of interdisciplinarity in ways that can be discouraging, probably more in economics than in history. Of course, there are concerns that another discipline cannot help address. Examples include historians' interest in subjectivity or economists' interest in certain theoretical qualities of models. But scholars in both camps share a number of goals, and they share them more and more. Economists have, in recent years, become concerned (some would say overly concerned, to the point of obsession) with "causality" in empirical work. This preoccupation leads to efforts to use statistical models that in theory mimic the fundamentals of a laboratory experiment. The economist's attempts to establish causality in economic history often yield claims that have little to do with historical causation, unfortunately. At the same time, many historians today have receded from the idea that understanding causation is inherently reductionist and seek more and more to explain large-scale changes in human societies.

The two disciplines sometimes end up making similar arguments but rely on terms or scholarly reference points that obscure intellectual overlap. For example, economics has long been comfortable using counterfactual arguments to think about historical change. Historians generally react negatively to counterfactuals without admitting that they, too, often embed counterfactual reasoning in their narratives.<sup>7</sup> The two disciplines could have more fruitful dialogues if participants recognized and built on this and other points of commonality.

Since 2008, all things economic have been making a comeback in history departments. Meanwhile, economists working on historical topics now routinely publish in the economics profession's most prestigious journals and have won the last two Sveriges Riksbank Prizes in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel (the so-called Nobel Prize in economics). A growing convergence on topics rolls along with a divergence of assumptions and methods. This situation reflects the perverse incentives devised by each discipline and its professional organizations. But there is no reason to think that answers to the questions that historians and economics share cannot be sharpened by a more serious understanding of each other's concerns and a more generous disposition toward the other discipline's toolbox.

Ultimately, the most important thing is goodwill. Some people will turn up at a presentation solely to put the speaker from another discipline "in their place," to make clear to those in the audience that what this person is doing is so fundamentally flawed there is no point in trying seriously to understand it. At its worst, such behavior turns scholarly conversation into a condescending version of an oral examination. Such people exist in all disciplines. Not allowing them to poison interdisciplinary gatherings is an important step.

We have argued that interdisciplinary communication requires participants to be aware of subtle and unfortunate barriers to fruitful collaboration. Handbooks of social etiquette are a thing of the past, and the time seems ripe to get one of the earliest practitioners of the genre in Europe, Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536), off the pedestal.<sup>8</sup> But handbooks of social etiquette stress an important point for interdisciplinarity: that working

<sup>7</sup> For one example of concealed counterfactual reasoning among many, see Brege, *Tuscany in the Age of Empire*. Fewer historians engage openly with the premises and outcomes of counterfactual narratives, e.g., Rosenfeld, "Why Do We Ask 'What If?'"

<sup>8</sup> The picture featured on the front cover captures a moment of the temporary relocation of Erasmus's statue in Rotterdam in 1963. Stadsarchief Rotterdam, 4100/1993-5846-EN-5847, Alex de Herder, *Verplaatsing van het standbeeld Erasmus*, September 1963.

successfully with others requires an appreciation of what others intend to achieve and how those intentions can get lost when expectations are not identical. Good institutional design is a necessary though not sufficient condition for the success of interdisciplinary programs. These pages are hardly a comprehensive guide for how to increase the productivity of intellectual exchanges between historians and economists. We nevertheless believe that the form and the substance of those exchanges go hand in hand.

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