

### The emergence of social scientific history and the analysis of process-produced data: some introductory remarks

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The Emergence of Social Scientific History and the Analysis  
of Process-Produced Data: Some Introductory Remarks

If I am informed rightly, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. maintained at a similar discussion that all quantitative information is without great importance for the historian and that all important questions in history are of a qualitative nature. On the other hand, more than fifty years ago John Clapham stated in his simple and straightforward manner that economic history always ought to ask: how many, how large, how often – in other words that economic history always is quantitative in nature. We all know, of course, that just as political history cannot exclude *quanta* like the number of soldiers fighting in a war or the number of voters electing a political party to government, economic history also cannot be reduced to *quanta* since ideas, values, personalities and decisions play their part in economic life and cannot always be meaningfully subjected to measurements.

These are trivialities and I will not discuss them here. To approach the question which is put in the title of this panel – how the emergence of social scientific history is connected with the analysis of process-produced data – let me start with some personal recollections. More than 25 years ago, when I – without knowing what I was doing – started my first independent steps in social history I came across a collection of sources which nowadays could serve as a perfect starting point for a quantitative study of certain social strata and religious groups of eighteenth century southern Germany. As a twenty year old student of history I read many small autobiographies and „confessions“ of Suabian pietists which I found at the University library at Tübingen. The authors mainly were *petit bourgeois* and small independent peasants, living in the country-side or small towns in a similar life style, sharing a common belief, and worrying about the same problems. Most were fairly poor in material things but regarded themselves as rich spiritually, well prepared for an other-worldly life. They were eager to convince others of the rightness of their beliefs and attitudes, but did not care about politics, and even displayed a certain contempt for worldly distractions and power. Most of them had many children, and quite a few had a second wife, since the first often had died in childhood. They were not mobile, neither geographically nor socially, but proud of staying at the place where God had put them and saw to it that their wives and children also would stay in their proper, *id est* inferior place. They worked hard and seemed to be good artisans and peasants but more important than *laborare* was *orare*. Praying and singing and praising God for all he had done and particularly for all the consolation he had given during a long day's hard work was what counted to

them. Occasionally there would be a merchant or a nobleman amongst them, equal as brother in faith, but distinct as a social being.

Fascinated, I wrote about two dozen life histories (essays of 8–20 pages each) to demonstrate what I thought was the typical, common feature of these men. Without really knowing, I wrote my first essays in social history and tried to sell them to a publisher hoping I could finance the rest of my studies through the sales of such a book. The lector of the publisher, an elegant lady of about 35 years, asked me into her office to talk about the manuscript. Although my writing was immature, she thought these stories were fascinating, but — above all — the book would not sell. Therefore, these first essays of mine are still unpublished, and if I have not lost them at one of my many moves since, they are still in the deepest corner of an old wardrobe where I keep my unfinished papers and materials. I earned my living, by the way, by writing about witchcraft trials and similar events for local newspapers. Unwittingly I was thus confronted with the difference between the *histoire des événements* and the *histoire de la mentalité* without knowing of the *Annales*. (Later I 'invented' modern qualitative and quantitative economic history for myself — a field which I never studied as a student). And when I wrote in my first published book, *Die Bildungswelt des deutschen Handwerkers um 1800. Studien zur Soziologie des Kleinbürgers im Zeitalter Goethes* (1955) that in the last instance every education is self-education („im Letzten ist jeder Autodidakt“), this early wisdom of my then 24 or 25 years was not only drawn from the 200 and odd autobiographies and letters I had read for this book but also from my own life experience.

If I had a student today who asked my advice after having found such sources himself — I wish I had such a student — I certainly would not recommend to him, if he wished to do serious scholarly work, to write a couple of impressionistic if impressive essays, but to read some sociology, study some similar dissertations, think about what could be done with such materials in the light of all this, learn some statistical procedures and perhaps a computer language, then start putting certain quantifiable features of his sources — like social origin, geographic mobility, age, number of children, social status, fortune etc. — on cards or tapes which finally could be processed either by hand or preferably by a computer. I would also recommend to try to quantify characteristics which can tell us about attitudes, e. g. certain key words and expressions, the contents of the prayers and songs, and the timetable of the daily life, in order to come up with a scientific-social history of this group of people in this particular time and region. Such a book would start with a theoretical framework, describe the sources and the methods used, be filled with lots of tables and appendixes, and culminate in some explanations and generalizations; it would probably be quite boring to everybody except those who want to write similar studies, while the book I mentioned before, the *Bildungswelt*, my more mature outcome of these first studies, is still fun to read 22 years after its publication.

Such is the emergence of social-scientific history and the analysis of process-produced data as I have witnessed it myself during the last quarter-century. What has changed and what is the situation now? The latter question will be discussed

by better trained and informed people during the next few days. I wish to concentrate in the second part of my remarks on the first one. What, if anything, has changed? Where and how has the availability of new techniques of research, the possibility to collect and process mass data of social historical relevance altered our knowledge? Does it affect our theoretical concepts, does it give deeper insights or does it only allow more precise answers for questions of the Clapham-type: how many, how large, how often? It seems obvious that the answer on this last part of the question is the most positive one. Data collection, and data processing have enabled scholars in many fields to know better, more exactly what we assumed anyway, but could not fully verify except perhaps by example. Whether we take historical demography or time series of foreign trade, exchange rates, prices and wages, business cycles, whether we think of the standard of living controversy or of voting behavior, all have benefited from the possibility to use mass data and to process them in manifold ways where formerly the working capacity of a single person or a group of researchers had set narrow limits. It may well be that in many cases we only know with certainty or somewhat more in detail what we knew before. Nevertheless, we must not underestimate the amount of scientific progress which can be promoted by such small steps.

But did we gain deeper insights? Certainly, the adoration of quanta has led to some overestimation of their cognitive value. There is a danger of making big efforts for *trivia*. Even otherwise very perceptive and subtle scholars may fall for the fascination of their new tools and report simple, self-evident results as important new insights, as Franklin Mendels has just criticized in a review of Emanuel Le Roy Ladurie's essays. Traditional historians often have this tendency in mind when they criticize the quantifiers. Not everything which can be quantified should be quantified. There is the very real danger that, as Albert Fishlow has put it, we know more and more about unimportant things but less about the important problems because they are too complex to be reduced to quantifiable terms. It would certainly be a mistake, therefore, to reduce social and economic history to quantitative history.

Probably negative is the answer, if we think of the results for the development of sociological theory or the basic concepts in social philosophy. I may be wrong, but I have the impression that most, if not all, the relevant sociological concepts have been developed before the age of the computer and that very little, if anything has been added through new research tools and techniques as they have become available during recent years. But in the long run, in the social sciences as well as in the physical science there will be a repercussion also in this area, because new methods and data are bound to promote new or, at least, more sophisticated concepts.

One fundamental change is already apparent. When I was a student I learned, among other now obsolete notions, that the difference between the social and natural sciences was that the social sciences cannot experiment, and do not have laboratories in which the researcher sets up controlled conditions. This is no longer true. Data processing allow us „to play around“ with data, to use different concepts

and techniques and to try the concept or data series which fits best. There is a lot of formal play which may just give intellectual satisfaction without opening up new insights. What does it mean for our understanding of say, business cycles and the reasons for their behavior, if we know that one type of a mathematically defined curve fits the data better than another one? Can we explain the oscillations of the economy any better? As the economist has to be careful not to fall for the money-veil that may obscure real movements in the economy, social historians have to be careful not to obstruct the sight of their subject through an elaborate formal apparatus. Here, as in problem-solving general, I believe in a pragmatic approach which allows selection of the proper method and technique by a kind of cost-benefit analysis of research in each case.

To conclude: It seems that the availability of techniques for data collecting and processing has widened the scope of scientific research in all kinds of socio-economic and socio-political history; it allows definite and testable small progress step by step and therefore narrows the gap between 'hard' and 'soft' sciences by making social history a bit harder than it used to be. But certainly these instruments only very slowly affect our basic concepts in the social sciences and cannot claim a monopoly at the expense of other, more traditional forms of interpreting and writing social and economic history.