

“true” but cannot be; neither is *vera*, but both can be, and to be any good must be, believable, *verisimilar*. My (hi)story will be good if it *rings* true (at least to those with a mind-set similar to mine), no more can be asked of it; the historian’s craft is worlds away from the scientist’s, “scientific history” is an oxymoron that proclaims, again, a lack of education, a lack of (contemporary) culture.

For a (hi)story to “ring true” it must not clash with our strong beliefs; and I have two. I believe in the power of human logic, in our capacity for error-free deduction (Descartes be blessed); and I believe in the human aversion to work, to effort, to “the sweat of our brows.” The one allows us to develop the ineluctable implications of the other: the discipline that does so, that investigates what we call “rational choice” (as if it could be anything else) is what we call “economics.”⁹ And that is why I see the recovery of competence in economic theory as the defining feature of the “cliometric” approach, why I see myself as a cliometrician, whether or not the problem I am addressing requires quantification; why I find no value in the “economic histories” that make no *economic* sense, the stories that are simply *not* possible if we believe, as I do, in the validity of human logic, and in the human aversion to effort.

To ring true as *economic* history, in short, my story must be good economics. To ring true as economic *history*, quite analogously, it must be good history, it must sit well with “the facts.” As noted, however, our cliometric *vulgata* glorifies “interpretation,” the elucidation of the relationships among the facts, and reduces the elucidation of the facts themselves to “measurement,” seen as the simple process of setting a yardstick next to an observed object, seen as only a simple-minded nineteenth-century positivist (or contemporary economist) could see it.

Whether or not we can “observe” the present, we certainly cannot observe the past, for it is *gone*; all we can observe are the traces it left behind.¹⁰ The quantitative traces (“data”) of particular

⁹ It follows that economics is relevant wherever choices have to be made, if only because the day is not infinitely long: those who consider our discipline relevant only to modern market economies utterly misapprehend it.

¹⁰ I am reminded here of a book I had, that taught the reader to recognize the presence of unseen wildlife from their droppings. The title that sticks in my mind sounds like *Birds of North America*, but I know it wasn’t that.