

History: Dismal Science or Delight*

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The discipline of history, in making an effort to be an “exact science,” appears at times to be struggling to reach Thomas Carlyle’s description of economics as the “dismal science.” The chaos of the present day has brought much unease to historians, for they have a hard time deciding what role they are to play and how to play it. Can the historian reduce his subject to an exact science or is he permitted to use his creative imagination to reconstruct the past? What uses, if any, can he make of the past to serve the present and the future?

Most historians would agree that they should tell the truth about the past, but like Pilate who asked “What is Truth?” they too often do not “stay for an answer.” Frequently they conclude that the latest fashionable technique is the open sesame to truth. At the moment historians have discovered the computer, which has become a new golden calf to worship. Unfortunately too few understand the uses and the limitations of computers that business and industry have lately revealed. Historians have also discovered statistics as a new means of revelation, but again, unfortunately, they do not understand that figures are not necessarily valid statistics. One of the greatest statisticians of the present day has declared that most so-called “statistics” used by historians are invalid because they do not have a large enough sample. With a few figures about a particular locality, they generalize and argue from silence about a whole region, or they draw the wrong conclusions.

It is astonishing how some historians naively hail the latest fashion in research as the only road to truth. A corollary to this is an intolerance of all those who do not embrace the new faith. The path of historians for the past century and a half is littered with abandoned dogmas that ought to provide a warning against certainty that any one method is the only way to truth. Statistics, computers, and the whole panoply of modern technology can provide the historian with highly useful instruments, but they can not be a substitute for the human mind and imagination. The historian should maintain a wise skepticism and be catholic and tolerant of any method that promises to illu-

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minate the past. Above all, in the historian's zeal to "do good" by society, he should not confuse history with propaganda. The lesson of the Nazi historians is so fresh in memory that their bad example ought to be a warning to historians who believe they ought to make history serve as an agency of reform.