

A Contemporary Historiography of Economics, edited by Till Düppe & E. Roy Weintraub, New York, Routledge, 2019, pp. ix-218

Probably no one in the last thirty years has devoted more efforts than E. Roy Weintraub to investigate how the history of economics can be studied. Weintraub's endeavors have provided not only one institution devoted to the history of economics (and particularly contemporary economics), *The Center for the History of Political Economy* at Duke, but also important methodological lessons. In particular the author's turn away from a Lakatosian methodology to a more comprehensive approach, looking for escaping "whiggism", has encouraged historians of economics to get over with simple theoretical and methodological issues to also embrace institutional and disciplinary ones. This means making sense of "history" with respect to history of economics. If history of economics concerns history and not only economics, then it involves also historiography, that is how to make historical research.

A brief "auto-biographical" sketch of the reasons that pushed Weintraub toward writing history of economics is stated by the author himself in the very first pages of the introduction to this volume. From this, it also emerges his early annoyance with both the steady traditional approach to the history of economics, namely, a sort of march of progress from past errors to present scientific theories (this "positive" approach is that of important economists-turned-historians, such as Paul Samuelson, George Stigler, or Joseph Schumpeter), and with testing a theory as a "Lakatosian research program". Both these approaches, albeit quite different one from the other (Weintraub has been involved only in the second, when dealing with the reconstruction of the history of general equilibrium theory and his mathematical proofs), can lead to what is called "practitioner history", which can be historically ineffective or incomplete. Quite from the beginning of his career, Weintraub's main concern was to find ways to avoid this approach, i.e., to keep the economics apart from its history. History of science deals with these problems since its establishment as a field of scholarship, so it has offered the initial "path to follow" for those scholars committed to the same concerns as Weintraub regarding the history of economics. Thus, the sociology of scientific knowledge, the studies of individual biographies, research centers and institutions, and private memories have entered the discourse of the historian of economics.

The present book, edited by Weintraub together with one of the most brilliant young historians who followed his path, Till Düppe, can be seen as the genuine product of Weintraub's entire career, the true mark of his approach to the history of economics and, at the same time, the proof of the influence of his scholarship. In this sense, the volume aims at providing scholars with a sort of descriptive tool box to engage new historiographic innovations (like quantitative methods or Social Network Analysis), but also to proffer guidance to «a more informed and autonomous historiography beyond the limits of economists' discourse» (p. 3). The book is a collection of different essays, originally presented at a conference at the University of Lausanne, in October 2017. The deeply revised papers are divided in four groups, each one involving different methodological issues or approaches and corresponding to one part of the volume.

The first part contains works devoted to the problems of the economists' "living memory", i.e., autobiographical sketches, interviews and oral history. "Living memory" could for instance be very errati: this and other problems are discussed in papers by Weintraub, Düppe, Dorian Jullien and Harro Maas. Within this group, I found especially interesting Maas' essay on the method and implications of so-called "witness seminars". This approach has been extensively used in the field of contemporary history to investigate different topics. Bringing together «key participants of a specific historical event or episode to obtain a mix of different perspectives that may clash or coincide», the method aims at offering new insights of a specific event or episode, but can also lead to «an exchange of memories that feed upon one another in interesting and unexpected ways» (p.

56). Within the history of economics, a witness seminar has for instance been organized in 2010 by Maas himself to explore the spreading of experimental economics, but similar events, even if not real “witness seminars”, have been arranged to discuss many other topics (some are listed and briefly introduced in the paper: see pp. 58-9). The advantage of this type of direct account is that it may avoid some of the drawbacks connected with other types of oral history, like failing memory; yet, it also involves new risks, for instance, that of favoring stories of success rather than failure (pp. 60-1). Maas details these different implications through the description of his own witness seminar on the history of experimental economics.

Quantitative histories of economics are explored in the two contributions of the second part of the volume, namely, François Claveau and Catherine Herferld’s essay on Social Network Analysis (SNA) and Andrej Svorenčik’s one on Prosopography. The first essay sets out to show how SNA can offer a distinctive perspective on knowledge production, highlighting the relationships among authors and institutions as relevant factors to explain the genesis and spread of new theories. According to the authors, the usage of quantitative techniques to analyze, model and understand social networks may not only be a method of data representation, but also, and foremost, a method of discovery and confirmation. Thus, the knowledge of economic theories and of their histories remains central and cannot be replaced by a purely quantitative approach, which could well be an important complementary tool. (pp. 75-6). On its part, prosopography – the study of collective biographies – fits well with the staggering rise in size and specialization of the economics discipline – for example, to analyze the growth of PhD economics programs in postwar American universities (pp. 103 ff.)

The theoretical developments of modern economics have also affected the teaching of the discipline. Accordingly, the third part of the volume is devoted to exploring undergraduate and graduate programs in economics, through the recollection and analyses of lectures notes, syllabi, text examinations (Irwin Collier) and textbooks (Yann Giraud). These essays allow further understanding of how the discipline has changed through the decades after WWII. Finally, the essays in the last part investigate three different approaches to “material history”, a method largely used in the history of science. Consider for instance economic models as “artifacts”. This entails moving away from the narrow vision of science as a sequence of theories and ideas, while focusing instead on how the scientists work in reality. This issue is examined in Verena Halsmayer’s essay. The other two contributions cover “popular” histories of economics (Tiago Mata) and the economists’ relationship with social networks (Beatrice Cherrier).

If I were to raise a critic to this excellent volume is the total absence of any “defense” of the more traditional approach – rational reconstruction. Obviously, much has been written in the past decades on this theme, and references can be found in some of the essays in the collection (see for example Claveau and Herfeld). Still, in my view, this approach remains essential to scratch under the surface of a purely “sociological approach” and reconstruct the fundamental analytical content of different economic theories. Think for instance of a book like Ivan Moscatti’s recent one on the history of utility theory (Moscatti, 2018), which is much more traditional in his approach to the subject. It cannot be denied that even a work like this – though different from those collected by Weintraub and Duppe – has offered an important contribution to the history of contemporary economics.

But this critique cannot cancel the merit of the present collection. In fact, in this work a scholar may find a summary (though not, properly speaking, a recipe book) of how different methodological tools can be applied to different analyses. In order to enhance the perspective by which the complexity of the history of economics can be studied, this is an extremely useful first step.

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References

MOSCATI, I. (2018) *Measuring Utility*, Oxford, Oxford University Press