

Goldsmiths Research Online

*Goldsmiths Research Online (GRO)
is the institutional research repository for
Goldsmiths, University of London*

Citation

Villeneuve, Louise. 2020. A contemporary historiography of economics (Book Review). The European Journal of the History of Economic Thought, 27(5), pp. 799-801. ISSN 0967-2567 [Article]

Persistent URL

<https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/34013/>

Versions

The version presented here may differ from the published, performed or presented work. Please go to the persistent GRO record above for more information.

If you believe that any material held in the repository infringes copyright law, please contact the Repository Team at Goldsmiths, University of London via the following email address: gro@gold.ac.uk.

The item will be removed from the repository while any claim is being investigated. For more information, please contact the GRO team: gro@gold.ac.uk

A contemporary historiography of economics

by Till Düppe and E. Roy Weintraud (eds.), Routledge, 2019, ix + 218 pp., £105.00, ISBN 9781138049956

A research project is unlikely to prosper without an adequate methodology. Mainstream Economics PhD students have a clear methodological path laid before them. The water is murkier for PhD students and young researchers interested in the History of Economics. They come to realise that they have to sail through treacherous historiographic debates. Roy Weintraub in the introduction of *A Contemporary Historiography of Economics* emphasises the secular decline in the teaching of the field, resulting in young researchers lacking basic methodological training. Indeed, few programs around the world teach graduate courses in History of economic thought. Thus, most students coming to the field from Economics backgrounds do not receive rigorous training in History of Economics itself or in its methodologies. They, consequently, need to self-train in historiography.

A contemporary historiography of economics offers a collection of quantitative and qualitative methodologies to use and apply in History of Economics. Taken together, these go beyond the methods of textual exegesis of classical texts and archival research. Focusing on contemporary methodologies used by a “new generation of historians of economics”, Till Düppe, Roy Weintraub and their collaborators trace the diffusion of original and “imaginative” methodologies. The aim of the editors is to provide materials to support the self-training of historian of economics, simultaneously participating in broadening the knowledge of scholars interested in the methodology of the field.

The first part of the book presents interesting contributions on the construction of knowledge drawing from personal memories or testimonials of living actors. As such, it explores several qualitative techniques based on the collection of autobiographies, memories, interviews and seminars. Chapter 1 points out the obstacles raised by the recollection of memories, such as their distortion through time. It addresses the question of the bias engendered by the economists’ writing of their autobiographical memoirs. Chapter 2 centers on contemporary history of economics, the subset of history that deals with recent and remembered historical events. It interrogates the origin of the construction of knowledge by questioning the personal motivations that brings scientists to write specific academic papers or histories and that generally brings them to Academia. Chapter 2, therefore, provides solutions to the problem of conflict of interest that can arise from the interaction between the personal motivations, the psychological, the emotional and the scientific research. Finally, chapters 3 and 4 focus on the analysis of interviews and witness seminars, i.e. moderated group conversations between actors that can be organised to challenge their respective accounts of important events in the history of the discipline. Taken together, these chapters offer guidance in order to mitigate the issues associated with the use of oral sources.

The second part of the book is devoted to the study of groups. Chapter 5 looks at the use of social networks. The authors argue that social network analysis (SNA) can be used not only to represent relations between actors or entities, but to discover new hypotheses or confirm existing ones. Chapter 6 explains prosopography, i.e. collective biographies. Prosopography

is a method used to study groups of people that share biographical features. Ultimately, this second part also highlights the interaction between both methods. Indeed, social network analysis (SNA) is a method which can complement traditional approaches, or more exotic ones like prosopography.

The third and fourth parts of *A Contemporary Historiography of Economics* are concerned with the history of economics education, the education and training of economists as well as with the history of the field of history of economics. Chapter 7 studies the evolution of economic education. The analysis of textbooks is complemented by a look at reading lists, course outlines, exams and problems sets published, as well as professor's course notes and notes taken by students. These sources provide insights on past economists' training. They also inform us about the separation of academic departments into economics, finance and business. The following chapter specifically focuses on the significance of textbooks beyond their simple academic value. As argued by the author, they can be analysed to assess the dissemination of knowledge. More importantly, they can be used to understand the historical transformation of knowledge through the introduction of new concepts, debates and disputes.

The final three chapters offer new perspectives by studying materials that are rarely exploited. Chapter 9 uses artifacts or "objects made by humans" and their evolution to understand the making of economic knowledge, that is to explain the significance of the economy and the "economic". Chapter 10 and 11 respectively focus on popular histories of economics and social media. Both popular stories and social media are underestimated as a relevant scientific source of data by the community of scholars, which explains their scarce use. On the contrary, these contributions will convince the reader of the usefulness of popular stories and social media in the dissemination of ideas in Economics. The last chapter argues that social media, especially Twitter, are useful tools for scientists to gather new quantitative and qualitative data and to analyze various type of behaviour. The chapter goes further by providing advice to re-think Twitter as an essential support to develop historians' career and build a community. Indeed, the platform is used by scholars to look for sources or call for papers, to help improving their writing or to build a worldwide community of researcher.

As Till Düppe acknowledges in the afterword, it is not always clear whether the book is about methods used in history of contemporary economics, or about contemporary methodologies used in history of economics. In fact, the editors confessed hesitating on the title: From the "Historiography of Contemporary Economics" they finally opted for "A Contemporary Historiography of Economics". The confusion reveals the fact that the book cannot provide a methodological solution to every scholar's problem. It presents very specific examples that are not necessarily compatible with many research projects. As such, the scholar interested in the history of classical political economy might indeed find methods such as interviews, witness seminars, collection of memories, and analysis of postwar textbooks of little use for her work. Nevertheless, this collection is a must read for anyone interested in the methodology of History of Economics. It allows to escape from a traditional conception of the field to explore novel techniques that can be applied to study earlier periods. In addition, it is worth noting the many methodologies presented that can be used to study specific topics such as the construction of the economic science and its evolution, the dissemination of a

school of thought, or the studies of famous universities' economic department. As such, both SNA, prosopography and the methodologies presented in part III, can be used to study the construction of economics and its evolution, especially after World War II.

Overall, the book widens the boundaries of the methods used and provides diverse alternatives that are not obvious at first sight for new scholars interested in the field. In contrast to the characterization of the field as obsolete by mainstream economists, the book highlights innovative methods and original objects taken up by a new generation of scholars in history of economics. The contributions are stimulating and by exposing provocative methods, the book will hopefully contribute to increase the attractiveness of the field especially among the next generation of students.

Louise Villeneuve
Goldsmiths, University of London