

Perspectives

Introduction

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In August 2019, economist Johan Fourie of Stellenbosch University invited *Historia* to publish a “reflection piece” he had written and presented in March that year at the University of the Free State. In it, he puts forward his views of what History does, what it ought to do, and how it can perhaps be done better here in (South) Africa. His central concern is with big data and digitising records. He issues a number of seemingly bold challenges and provocations to historians. A slightly edited version of that piece is reproduced below.

Rather than publish it as a stand-alone piece, however, and in the spirit of respectful exchange, we are publishing four substantial engagements with several of the arguments made by Fourie. These responses are by Faeza Ballim, Gerald Groenewald, Jennifer Upton and Tinashe Nyamunda, all of whom are experts in their respective fields and experienced in their craft. Each takes the substantive points made by Fourie seriously, and responds to them in different ways. Best read as perspectives on a complex and enduring debate amongst people who are mindful of the politics of the past as well as being critically engaged with what historians “do” in the present, they recognise the technological and methodological promises of digital histories and big data, but eloquently remind us too of their limitations and indeed their potential pitfalls. There is much more to discuss, not the least of which is the responsibility for the ownership of and access to such records in a democratic and socially just world. The authors’ information is included at the close, after a brief “Response” by Fourie.



Making South African historians count¹

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This paper suggests that historians can do more to make themselves count. By recognising the benefits that new technologies have to offer and equipping themselves with these tools, historians can traverse the often-deep divides of the humanities and social sciences. This will not only allow them to have an impact beyond their narrow disciplinary boundary by, for example, helping economists to be more cognizant of context, but it would also allow them to be more ambitious in their research questions at a time when this is urgently needed. They can do this because history remains one of the few human and social sciences – if not the only one – that is, almost by definition, interdisciplinary. Whereas the humanities and social sciences have become pockets of speciality, each with its own jargon and journals, theories and theologies, history, in my brief sojourn into the field, still seems to be more inclined to using a variety of approaches, methods and theories. That is something, I would like to argue, worth celebrating. And, more importantly, it is a value worth instilling in the next generation of scholars, for the benefit of both the history discipline, the broader human and social sciences and society at large.

Academic traders and their tribulations

In suggestion that historians should make themselves count, I want to argue for three things. First, historians must be open to itinerant merchants from other social sciences. Sometimes the benefits of these wares might not be immediately apparent. Computer scientists interested in Big Data may seem far removed from the historian's domain, but their skills, as I'll demonstrate later, could turn unremarkable probate inventories into novel historical artefacts. Trade is at the heart of growth and development. This is as true for science as it is for an economy.

A second way historians can make themselves count is by sending out their own merchants, even to those social sciences that have a very different world view and may be, as a consequence, hostile to them. Exchange would require a knowledge of the cultural traditions and linguistic specificities present in those disciplines. It would mean reading their work and attending their conferences, things that are expensive and hard; the specialisation of the social sciences makes traversing the rugged terrain of the subfields tiresome and treacherous. In my own field, economics, research is characterised by dense mathematical modelling and econometric estimations. To be

1. This is a revised version of the Stanley Trapido seminar I presented to the International Studies Group at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein on 18 March 2019. I want to thank seminar participants for their comments and fruitful discussion. In particular, I wish to thank the following colleagues who have provided detailed comments on an earlier version of this paper: Anton Ehlers, Kate Ekama, Lindie Koorts, Nobungwele Mbem, Laura Phillips, Laura Richardson, Amy Rommelspacher and Danelle Van Zyl-Hermann.

clear: this is not a call for historians to become vassals of economics. To the contrary, I believe the economists' tools can be unhinged from the causal imperialism that has characterised the discipline for the last three decades.² Epistemological diversity can only benefit from the trade in toolkits.

Yet I fear that many young historians are sadly denied the opportunity to learn new (and rapidly advancing) tools outside the confines of their own field. This may be because an older generation of historians, given the historically violent nature of engagement between history and economics, have not acquired the necessary tools and were not taught the skills to use them. It may also be because the older generation, in a battle for the field's leadership, have to ensure that they only train apprentices that share their own methods and beliefs. And perhaps also, it is because experienced historians sense that these tools are only applicable to certain tasks, and not, as economists would often claim, superior in every setting. Regardless of the reasons for this lacuna, for the future fecundity of history, I would argue that some (but perhaps not all) apprentices should be sent to other social science disciplines to acquire new tools and the ability to use them. This will not only make the field of history stronger and prevent their annexation in future, but it may help to position them as future consuls of the social science community.

The third thing historians should do is to be bolder in their research questions. For fear of being forced to trade and barter with other social sciences, the historians have lowered their ambitions, sometimes producing what seems to be, at least to outsiders, artisanal artefacts that are otiose and ornamental. Perhaps it is fear of failure, the consequence of past ambitions unrealised, or possibly a calculated commitment to specificity, local conditions, context and historical contingency. But the demands of the time necessitate a different approach. I would argue that history is one of the few that can accommodate – and actually thrive – with audacious projects. Because of their ability to operate at the intersections of the different social sciences – and perhaps the natural sciences in some ways too – the modern historian should be well-positioned to ask the big research questions about human and societal behaviour. She is the ideal unifier, bringing the best from the social sciences together to work on major issues that affect all. This is desperately needed in the academic world of today, where global concerns of climate change, automation and populism, to name a few, will continue to affect all of us for a long time to come.

2. B. Fine and D. Milonakis, *From Economics Imperialism to Freakonomics: The Shifting Boundaries between Economics and Other Social Sciences* (Routledge, New York, 2009).

The microdata merchants

What skills should historians acquire? There are several: from text mining with rapidly improving Optical Character Recognition (OCR) techniques to using neural networks to date historical photos.³ New technologies allow historians to ask new questions or answer existing ones in novel ways. My focus here will be on one that I have worked on in my own research: microdata.

The surge in computing power and access to data processing software and online resources, has enabled social scientists over the past two decades to capture historical statistics on a much larger scale than before. In a 2016 paper published in the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, I argue that the data revolution is especially valuable when applied to regions where written records are fairly scarce, such as sub-Saharan Africa.⁴ I showed how a new generation of economists, geographers, and historians are rewriting African history using archival sources along with geographical, climatic and demographic projections into the distant past and finding some surprising answers.

Let me give a few examples from my most recent work. Although several reports record the wages of black mine workers in twentieth-century South Africa, these sources are often unrepresentative and incomplete. Not all black workers were mine workers, and compensation was not always paid in cash. If we therefore want to understand how black living standards evolved over the twentieth century, black wage rates offer, at best, a distorted view. Other variables that can help us understand living standards include infant mortality or life expectancy, but often these suffer from the same biases in that collection methods for these statistics may change over the period of analysis – for example, urban residents may have a higher chance of being recorded and because urbanisation rapidly increased over the period, the validity of the results is suspect.

So, instead, economic historians are forced to be creative. An alternative measure of living standards, one with a rich tradition in the economic history literature, is stature – or a person's height. Around 80 per cent of one's height is determined by genetics, but the rest is the result of a complicated interaction with one's environment. More protein at a young age makes us stronger, healthier and taller. A bad disease environment, with malaria and pollution, makes us weaker and shorter. The quality of life can therefore be traced through the changing heights of a population. The taller people are within one, two or three generations, the more likely it is that they grew up in better conditions, with improved nutrition, than earlier generations.

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3. P. Thompson, R.T. Batista-Navarro, G. Kontonatsios, J. Carter, E. Toon, J. McNaught, C. Timmermann, M. Worboys and S. Ananiadou, "Text Mining the History of Medicine", *PloS one*, 11, 1, 2016; E. Müller, M. Springstein and R. Ewerth, "When was This Picture Taken? Image Date Estimation in the Wild", in J. Jose et al (eds), *Advances in Information Retrieval: ECIR 2017* (Springer, Cham, 2017), pp 619–625.
 4. J. Fourie, "The Data Revolution in African Economic History", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 47, 2, 2016, pp 193–212.

Bokang Mpeteta and I teamed up with Kris Inwood, a Canadian scholar who had assembled data from a large number of attestation forms in the South African National Defence Force Archives. We extracted information on the height of black recruits and several other observable characteristics. We then went in search of other sources. We ascertained the heights of a series of cadavers at Wits University Medical School, which we incorporated into our analysis. And in more recent surveys – the Demographic and Health Survey and the National Income Dynamics Survey – we also found height information. Combining these four sources, we were able to plot, for the first time, height as a proxy for living standards over the twentieth century (see Figure 1). Our paper was published in 2018 by the *South African Journal of Science*.⁵

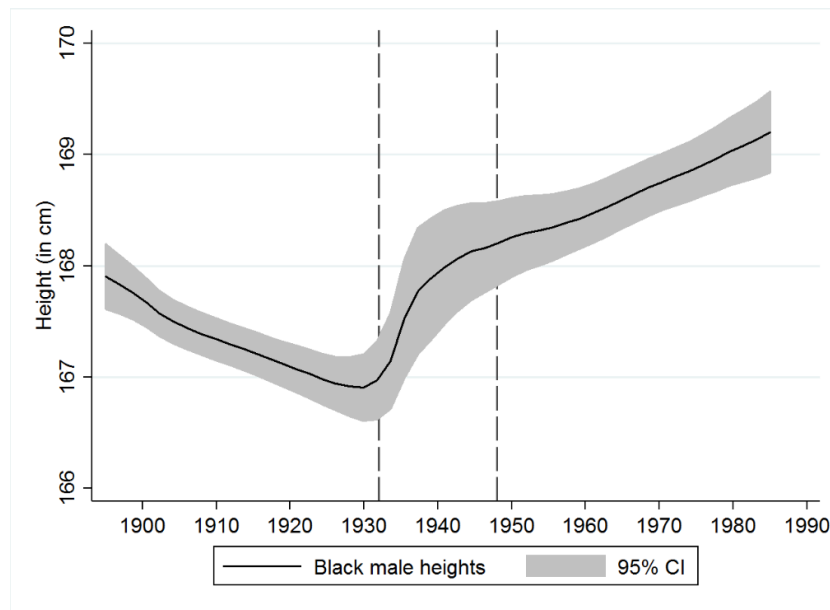


Figure 1: Black male heights, birth years 1895–1985.⁶

The next step is to extend the series back into the nineteenth century. There is already a team of scholars at Oxford University that is attempting to do this. Its findings suggest that black men were much taller in the nineteenth century, but their heights were declining by the end of the century, matching up to our series almost perfectly. There is, of course, much to debate about these numbers. Are they representative? Who was recorded, and why? But despite these concerns, it is undeniable that they provide us with a new perspective on the economic lives of people who have thus far only been written of as peripheral actors in the economic history of South Africa.

Let's take another example. Both English and Afrikaner historians of the twentieth century argued that the eighteenth-century settlers who would later become known as Afrikaners lived just above subsistence. There were good reasons for this. Afrikaner historians hoped to emphasise the economic self-determination that allowed Afrikaners to escape the poverty inflicted on them by war and natural disaster at the

5. B. Mpeteta, J. Fourie and K. Inwood, "Black Living Standards in South Africa before Democracy: New Evidence from Height", *South African Journal of Science*, 114, 1/2, 2018, pp 1–8.

6. Mpeteta, Fourie and Inkwood, "Black Living Standards".

end of the nineteenth century. Hermann Giliomee, in his seminal contribution on the history of the Afrikaner, gives a general consensus on early Afrikaner livelihoods: “The problem of white poverty in South Africa was initially predominantly a rural problem that manifested itself *after two centuries of subsistence farming*”.⁷ A recent book on twentieth-century Afrikaner prosperity collapses this sentiment into one sentence: “Afrikaner capitalism: from dirt poor to stinking rich”.⁸

English-speaking historians had a somewhat different objective. They aimed to use the Afrikaners’ history as an explanation for the racist apartheid policies implemented in the twentieth century. In *The Mind of South Africa*, Allister Sparks writes:

[T]he mind of the Afrikaner was shaped during the six generations they were lost in Africa: a people who missed the momentous developments of eighteenth-century Europe, the age of reason in which liberalism and democracy were born and which had its climax in the great revolution of the French bourgeoisie; a people who spent that time instead in a deep solitude which, if anything, took them back to an even more elementary existence than the seventeenth-century Europe their forebears had left; a people who became, surely, the simplest and most backward fragment of Western civilization in modern times.⁹

Both groups of historians assume that on average, settler farmers were relatively poor. The possibility that the early Cape settlers and their descendants might have been contributing to a thriving commercial economy is not considered.¹⁰ Such beliefs have persisted into the post-apartheid era. Charles Feinstein, in his authoritative book entitled *An Economic History of South Africa* published in 2005, dedicates only a few pages to the first two centuries of European settlement at the Cape.¹¹ After discussing them briefly, he concludes that “the great majority of colonists were poor and discontented”.¹² There are several other examples.¹³

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7. H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 2003), p 321, my emphasis.
 8. D. Meades, *Afrikaner-Kapitalisme: Van Brandarm tot Stinkryk* (Naledi, Cape Town, 2019).
 9. A. Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa* (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 2003), p 40.
 10. J. Fourie, “Subverting the Standard View of the Cape Economy: Robert Ross’s Cliometric Contribution and the Work it Inspired”, in I. Pesa and J-B. Gewald (eds), *Magnifying Perspectives: Contributions to History, a Festschrift for Robert Ross*, ASC Occasional Publication, 26 (African Studies Centre, Leiden, 2017), pp 261–273.
 11. C.H. Feinstein, *An Economic History of South Africa: Conquest, Discrimination, and Development* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005).
 12. Feinstein, *An Economic History of South Africa*, p 24.
 13. S. Trapido, “From Paternalism to Liberalism: The Cape Colony, 1800–1834”, *The International History Review*, 12, 1990, pp 76–104; M.H. de Kock, *Economic History of South Africa* (Juta, Cape Town, 1924), pp 24, 40.

But is this true? This is the question I attempted to answer in my doctoral dissertation.¹⁴ I analysed more than 2 500 probate inventories of settler households in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries and counted 28 different commodities and household goods. I found these settlers to be remarkably affluent. On average, farmers owned 5 enslaved people, 54 head of cattle and 350 head of sheep. I also used other sources, such as the *opgaafrolle*, to confirm my results.¹⁵ And I found other historians, such as Robert Ross and Pieter van Duin, who had questioned, almost three decades earlier, the supposed poverty of the settlers.¹⁶ By analysing probate inventories using the standard economics toolkit, I was able to debunk some of the myths that an earlier generation of historians had wanted to believe.¹⁷

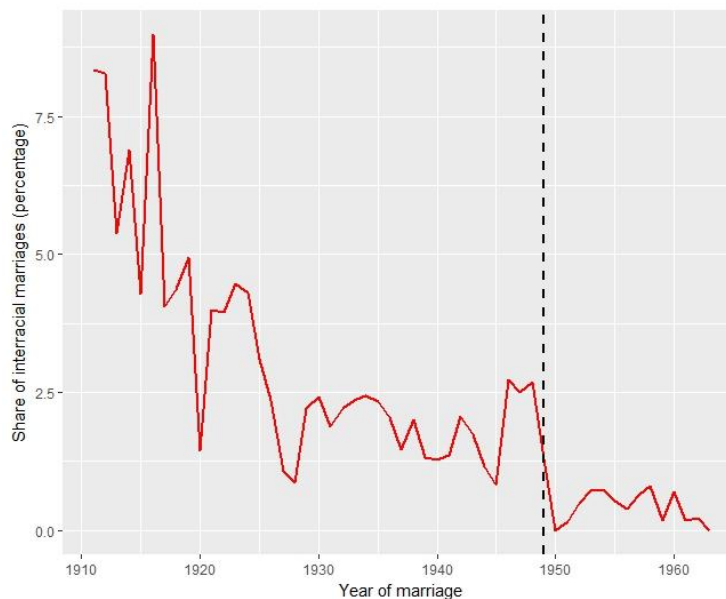


Figure 2: Share of interracial marriages, by year (1911–1965)

Much more work of this type must be done. One aim of the Biography of an Uncharted People project, an Andrew W. Mellon-funded initiative which I head up at Stellenbosch University, is to transcribe South African microdata sources that have hitherto been largely inaccessible to historians. Using methods that are fairly common in other social sciences, we are transcribing marriage records in Cape Town to say something about female empowerment and interracial marriages (Figure 2).¹⁸ We are transcribing baptism records so that we are able to calculate bridal pregnancy, uncovering the hidden histories of premarital sex in South Africa. (It was surprisingly high.) We are

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14. J. Fourie, “The Remarkable Wealth of the Dutch Cape Colony: Measurements from Eighteenth-Century Probate Inventories”, *The Economic History Review*, 66, 2, 2013, pp 419–448.
 15. Fourie, “The Remarkable Wealth”, p 434.
 16. P. van Duin and R. Ross, *The Economy of the Cape Colony in the 18th Century* (The Centre for the Study of European Expansion, Leiden, 1987), p 3.
 17. J. Fourie, “The Quantitative Cape: A Review of the New Historiography of the Dutch Cape Colony”, *South African Historical Journal*, 66, 1, 2014, pp 142–168.
 18. J. Fourie and K. Inwood, “Interracial Marriages in Early Twentieth-Century Cape Town: Evidence from Anglican Marriage Records”, *History of the Family*, 24, 3, 2019, pp 629–652.

also transcribing death notices to comment on the effects of the Spanish influenza and the speed of urbanisation. We are transcribing slave emancipation records and Cape auction rolls to gain a better understanding of why an institution as immoral as slavery persisted for so long. (It was because slaves were used as collateral.¹⁹) We are transcribing Cape Colony *opgaafrolle* – the Cape of Good Hope Panel project – to understand the labour relations between Khoen, Xhosa, settler and slave on the eastern Cape frontier.²⁰ We are transcribing nineteenth-century blue books and voter rolls to understand the process of state formation and disenfranchisement. We are transcribing patient files of the Grahamstown Lunatic Asylum, so that we can analyse the living standards of patients during the late nineteenth century. We are also transcribing the records of the incorporation of firms established in the Cape in the late nineteenth century, to understand the nature and scope of capitalism in nineteenth-century South Africa (the Frontiers of Finance project). And this is only the tip of the iceberg. What should be clear from the topics mentioned above is that few of them would be considered economic history. The microdata revolution and, more generally, the digital humanities revolution is sweeping the entire field of History. As Pim de Zwart notes, “even cultural historians are refocussing on the digital humanities and are starting to analyse ‘big data’”.²¹

A second aim of the Biography project is thus equally important: to equip the next generation of scholars with the tools of the digital humanities. I am recruiting students to Stellenbosch and inviting itinerant merchants, from near and far, to coach these students in using microdata and other research methods. Interdisciplinary approaches are challenging, but they are also likely to be more rewarding – and increasingly necessary. We hope to sell our wares locally and abroad. I hope to see some of our graduates move to other universities in South Africa, exchanging ideas and spreading the message. And as president of the Economic History Society of Southern Africa, I’ve set it as my goal to host interdisciplinary conferences where historians, economists and other social scientists are welcome to present their work in a setting that welcomes a variety of approaches.²²

But we can also learn from our colleagues abroad, and therefore urge my colleagues and students to attend international workshops, summer schools and conferences. I think it is essential for future South African historians to be conversant in the language of other social scientists, and in particular the languages of Economics and Geography. This, I believe, can only benefit the history profession, but, as I will argue next, it will also be of great benefit to economics and broader social sciences.

19. J. Fourie, “Slaves as Capital Investment in the Dutch Cape Colony, 1652–1795”, in P. Svensson and E. Hillbom (eds), *Agricultural Transformation in Global History Perspective* (Routledge, London and New York, 2013) pp 136–159.

20. J. Fourie and E. Green, “Building the Cape of Good Hope Panel”, *The History of the Family*, 23, 3, 2018, pp 493–502.

21. P. de Zwart, “The Future of Global Economic History: Regional Comparisons to Address Global Questions”, *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis*, 15, 2/3, 2018, pp 129–142.

22. The first of these conferences is planned for 8 October 2021 in Stellenbosch.

Consuls of the community

It is not only historians that will benefit from their interactions with other social sciences. Trade is not a zero-sum game. Both parties gain from exchange. I shall try to convince you that historians have at least three things to teach other fields: firstly, about methods, secondly, about sources and finally about causality.

In his 2011 presidential address to the Economic History Association, Barry Eichengreen, professor of economics at UC Berkeley, made a case for analogical reasoning: that is, the ability to use a shared past experience to convey meaning.²³ While many scientists use deductive and inductive reasoning in their research, Eichengreen's exposure to the policy debates following the Great Recession of 2007, showed him the power of what could otherwise simply be called story-telling.

Here's what happened. When the severity of the 2007 financial crisis became apparent, policy-makers had to think on their feet. They could have followed a deductive approach to decide which policies to implement. This would have required them first to agree on the theoretical reasons for the crisis, but this would have been incredibly difficult given the deep divides in the field of macroeconomics. Alternatively, they could have followed an inductive approach. But this would have required detailed statistical evidence, the like of which was not yet available in the midst of the crisis. So, what did they do? They told a story about a past crisis – the Great Depression of the 1930s. It just so happened that a student of the Great Depression, Ben Bernanke, was chair of the Federal Reserve, and could avoid the same mistakes that policy-makers had made almost eighty years earlier. As Eichengreen notes: "Journalists, market participants, and policy makers all turned to history for guidance on how to react to this skein of otherwise unfathomable events".²⁴

Historians are great storytellers. They should use their skills of narration to help us to gain a better understanding of the world we live in. But it is not only about telling better stories. It is about telling stories of the stories that were told while these events were happening. In his 2017 presidential speech to the American Economic Association, Nobel-prize winning economist Robert Shiller called for the study of "narrative economics".²⁵ As he put it:

When we as economists want to understand the most significant economic events in our history, such as the Great Depression of the 1930s, or subsequent recessions, or policies towards wealth and poverty, we rarely focus on the important narratives that accompanied them. We have lagged behind other

23. B. Eichengreen, "Economic History and Economic Policy", *The Journal of Economic History*, 72, 2, 2012, pp 289–307.

24. Eichengreen, "Economic History", p 289.

25. R. J. Shiller, "Narrative Economics", *American Economic Review*, 107, 4, 2017, pp 967–1004.

disciplines in attending to the importance of narratives, and while all disciplines use narratives more since 2010, economics (and finance) remain laggards.²⁶

The narratives we use matter because they affect our behaviour. People are seldom convinced by fact or figures; we are far more likely to be swayed by a story that strengthens our existing beliefs and biases.²⁷ The way we tell history, therefore, and the topics we talk about *have real world consequences*.

Roy Havemann has recently produced wonderful insights into the collapse of Saambou and other small banks in the early 2000s.²⁸ Most of what we knew about recent banking failures in South Africa depended on haphazard and superficial newspaper articles, perhaps an official government-sanctioned report or the one-sided biographies of those involved in the crisis. Havemann does a brilliant job of combining empirical sources and estimation techniques to show how the crisis spread, and why it was not necessarily the most at-risk banks that ultimately collapsed. But what the historian could add is the perspective from below: what did the bankers, or Treasury officials, or Reserve Bank governor believe was happening? Through which networks did news spread, and who were part of those networks? Why did it go wrong when, as Havemann shows, it did not need to? Robert Shiller reminds us a “deep understanding of history requires imputing what was on the minds of those people who made history, what their narratives were”.²⁹ Narratives, in short, allow for historical analyses which point to the importance of human agency as much as (or even more than) structure.

A second contribution historians can make to the study of economics is to teach us source critique. Few economists nowadays collect their own data. Some African economic historians sit happily in Starbucks while downloading datasets from repositories with little concern about what we would call “the data generating process”.³⁰ Who compiled the data? From where? Why? For what purpose? These are not typical questions that economists answer. Economists care a great deal about selection, yes. Is this a representative sample of the total population? But once we have confirmed that it is, we are happy to believe that the data is reliable – or, at least, that the remaining errors are orthogonal to what we hope to prove.

26. Shiller, “Narrative Economics”, p 969.

27. J.T. Kaplan, S.I. Gimbel and S. Harris, “Neural Correlates of Maintaining One’s Political Beliefs in the Face of Counterevidence”, *Scientific Reports*, 6, 2016, 39589.

28. R.C. Havemann, “Lessons from South African Bank Failures 2002 to 2014”, PhD thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2019.

29. Shiller, “Narrative Economics”, p 969.

30. J. Fourie and N. Obikili. “Decolonizing with Data: The Cliometric Turn in African Economic History”, in C. Dieboul and M. Hauptert (eds), *Handbook of Cliometrics* (Springer, Cham, 2019), pp 1721–1745.

Perspectives: Making historians count

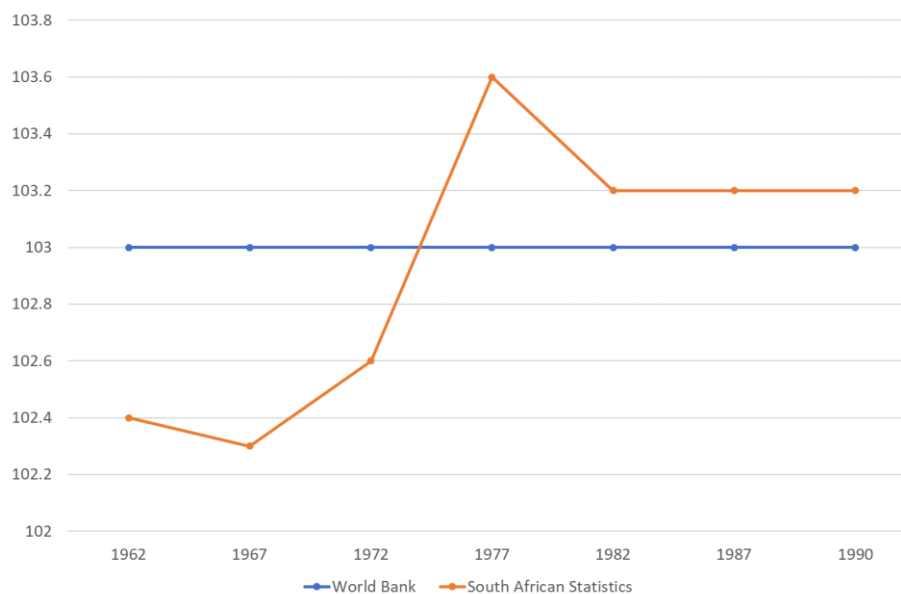


Figure 3: World Bank data versus South African statistics.³¹

Let me provide a simple example. Let's say you would want to look at the sex ratio at birth for a host of African countries. Where do you go first? The World Bank World Development Indicators is probably the most reliable source: this is exactly what one of my colleagues at Stellenbosch, Francisco Marco-Gracia, did. He downloaded the data and found something fascinating: the sex ratio at birth for several African countries, including South Africa, had not changed over the entire period of data availability (1962–1990). He then did what any good historian would do – he went to other sources to confirm the results. Unsurprisingly, when he looked at the original South African censuses, he found the WDI statistics had been completely fabricated (economists would say it was imputed, but that is just a rhetorical trick).

This matters. Sex ratios at birth are sometimes used in regression analysis for a variety of reasons. While economists think very hard about the econometric specifications of their analysis – probably because they are trained to do this and are rewarded by journals for doing so – what should clearly matter more is the data they put into their models. Rubbish in, rubbish out. I am not the first to argue this, of course. Morten Jerven has written eloquently about the dangers of poor numbers.³² Historians can help us understand the value of historical context in our data-generating processes – and should be more critical of economists who try to bamboozle their audience with nifty techniques without a similar effort to understand the sources they use.³³

31. F. Marco-Gracia and J. Fourie, “Missing Boys: Explaining South Africa’s Unbalanced Sex Ratio, 1894–2011”, *ERSA Working Paper 804*, November 2019.

32. M. Jerven, *Poor Numbers: How We are Misled by African Development Statistics and What to Do About It* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2013).

33. Lamoreaux makes this and several other points in arguing that the future of economic history must be interdisciplinary. See N. Lamoreaux, “The Future of Economic History Must be Interdisciplinary”, *The Journal of Economic History*, 75, 4, 2015, pp 1251–1257.

Let me make one side-remark about sources. Both Economics and History are fundamentally empirical sciences. We do theorise about the world, but much of what we do is to test our theories with real-world evidence. Economists use cross-sectional, or panel or time-series datasets, historians use a kaleidoscope of archival sources. When either or both of those fields become too theoretical – as has happened in the past and could likely happen again – Economics with all its mathematical models and History with its postmodernist bent, then we are both poorer for it. As economist Gary Fields wrote in December 2000 about South Africa’s high unemployment rate: “A fundamental truth is sometimes forgotten: if you're poor, you can't get rich by selling to yourself”.³⁴

Just as no country has become prosperous by closing its borders, no academic field has grown influential by talking to itself. Theory is only useful when tested against evidence. “The most daunting aspect of analysing society, whether in its historical dimension or its present structure, is an awareness that much of what we write must sooner or later be faulted by different and more satisfactory methods of using evidence”.³⁵ These are Stanley Trapido’s words in 1972. Let us be open to new sources and methods of analysing them, and wary of economists who just train students in Mathematics, or historians who abolish courses that take students into the archive.

A third way in which historians can help economists is to think about causality. The credibility revolution in Economics, with clever identification strategies to confirm a causal relationship between two variables empirically, has had a considerable influence on Economic History and beyond.³⁶ Good students of Economics who are interested in History are urged to find “natural experiments” – a random, exogenous shock that could be used to test its causal effect on some later outcome. There is much to praise in these types of studies – and we have learned a lot from them. Whereas the first papers to use these methods were only interested in proving that “history matters”, the more recent wave of papers care more about why and how it matters.³⁷ That is a good thing. But there is a danger lurking. Soon we will run out of “natural experiments” that are cleanly identified.³⁸ What then? And more importantly, outcomes like higher incomes, upward mobility or taller individuals are never the

34. G.S. Fields, “The Employment Problem in South Africa”, *Trade & Industry Monitor*, 16, 2000, pp 3–6.

35. S. Trapido, “South Africa and the Historians”, *African Affairs*, 71, 285, 1972, pp 444–448.

36. J. D. Angrist and J-S. Pischke, “The Credibility Revolution in Empirical Economics: How Better Research Design is Taking the Con out of Econometrics”, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 24, 2, 2010, pp 3–30.

37. C. Monnet and E. Quintin, “Why do Financial Systems Differ? History Matters”, *Journal of Monetary Economics*, 54, 4, 2007, pp 1002–1017; E. Huillery, “History Matters: The Long-term Impact of Colonial Public Investments in French West Africa”, *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 1, 2, 2009, pp 176–215; P. Jones, “History Matters: New Evidence on the Long-run Impact of Colonial Rule on Institutions”, *Journal of Comparative Economics*, 41, 1, 2013, pp 181–200.

38. J. Diamond and J. A. Robinson (eds), *Natural Experiments of History* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2010).

result of just one monocausal origin. What these studies often do is to explain one causal factor with a high degree of accuracy, but the factor may only contribute a small component of the actual effect. This is especially true when the other determinants are difficult to measure.³⁹ As several economists now admit, the focus is too readily on statistical rather than economic significance.⁴⁰

This is certainly not an attempt to repudiate the economists' causal inference. But it is a plea for historians to engage economists and question their assumptions and inferences. Historians' deep knowledge of the past is necessary to expose missed mechanisms and invisible interactions; to point out the obvious (more important) questions hidden from view when regression analysis is the only method in the researcher's employ, and to complicate the often over-simplified, narratives which, as Gareth Austin says, "compress history".⁴¹ "Big data" is a complementary source for historians. In the same way, archival material/oral history can explain things that large data sets cannot. In South Africa, historians are largely on the periphery of research and policy debates. My message here is that this need not be the case. Historians must play a more active role, in academe and in government, to tell the stories that will shape our views, to critique the poor numbers we economists have come to rely upon, and to inject a more complicated view into the monocausal pasts we so easily construct.

Final thoughts

History may not strictly be considered a science, but History makes for better science. In fact, History is the nexus of the human and social sciences. That is because, ultimately, almost all empirical evidence is historical. Even psychology or behavioural economic experiments are performed within a certain time and space. Devoid of that context, the interpretations of the results may be biased towards the ethics and experiences of the observer's own time and space. Context matters, and the methods and sources historians use help us to understand that. I want to urge South African historians to travel to neighbouring and distant human, social and natural sciences, to learn their tools and techniques, and to use them to answer ambitious research questions. It won't be easy, but it is necessary. Not only for the survival of the history profession, but for the good health and prosperity of the social science community at large. That is why historians count, in South Africa and elsewhere. Let us hope they take up the challenge.



39. For a recent critique, see S. Bourgeois-Gironde and É. Monnet, "Natural Experiments and Causality in Economic History: What Relation to Theory and Temporality?", *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 72, 4, 2017, pp 1087–1116.

40. S. Ziliak and D.N. McCloskey, *The Cult of Statistical Significance: How the Standard Error Costs Us Jobs, Justice, and Lives* (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2008).

41. G. Austin, "The 'Reversal of Fortune' Thesis and the Compression of History: Perspectives from African and Comparative Economic History", *Journal of International Development: The Journal of the Development Studies Association*, 20, 8, 2008, pp 996–1027.

How should historians count?

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Johan Fourie's plea for South African historians to be more audacious in their research ideas is a compelling one, although vague on the definition of a suitably bold project. In this commentary I consider these possible directions, while sounding a note of caution on their portents.

Fourie argues that historians should engage more extensively with contemporary socio-political issues. It is important to note that historians are not entirely devoid of interest in national policy-related matters. Land reform in South Africa is an excellent illustration of this. Historians such as William Beinart and Peter Delius, who are experts in transformations in the countryside, have made significant contributions to policy and litigation concerned with land restitution, communal tenure and traditional authorities. It is ultimately challenging to identify the types of historical writing that constitute social engagement given the fact that all historians speak to present concerns, even the seemingly "ornamental" ones. As E.H. Carr noted in 1961, "...history is an unending dialogue between the present and the past".¹ Even the preoccupation with the local, which Fourie mentions, was born out of political activism.

The preoccupation with the local emerged from the disillusionment with the grand, overarching explanations of historical change in vogue in the 1970s at a time when Marxist historiography captured the imagination of scholars around the world. In response, a generation of historians in the 1970s and 1980s, sympathetic to charges of academic elitism, were concerned with furthering the struggle against apartheid. They were inspired by emerging approaches of social history and urged that attention be paid to the voices and experiences of ordinary South Africans. In so doing they gave attention to the experiences of the individual and examined processes at the local level to shed light on broader historical trends. I agree that inadvertently this has led to a neglect of the levers of power, the activities of the state and changing economic trends, and that historians need to re-centre the role of the state and the macro-level political economy in studies of historical change.² Indeed, there has been a surge of interest in

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1. E.H Carr, *What is History? The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures Delivered in the University of Cambridge January–March 1961*, second edition (Penguin Books, London, 1987), p 30.
 2. Exceptions to this over the years include: C.H. Feinstein, *An Economic History of South Africa: Conquest, Discrimination, and Development* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005); B. Fine and Z. Rustomjee, *The Political Economy of South Africa: From Minerals-Energy Complex to Industrialisation* (C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, London, 1996); D. Posel, *The Making of Apartheid, 1948–1961: Conflict and Compromise* (Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1991).

the state and of state corporations in recent years, likely spawned by the signs of its debilitation in the midst of the South African state capture saga.³

It is true that a macro-level requires different techniques to the granular, intimate methodology of social history. Fourie's phrase "making historians count" naturally leads one to consider the use of quantitative methods. Quantitative studies by definition rely on the force of numbers, or on large amounts of data from which to draw conclusions and so is far removed from the intimate concern with the experiences of the individual that animate social historians. South African historians have neglected quantitative methods of analysis, with students of History receiving little to no training in statistical methods at universities. These methods have their own drawbacks, not least of which is their inability to establish causation convincingly. But as Fourie writes, this is not an insurmountable obstacle to conducting valuable historical research. The value of quantitative methods in establishing plausible explanations for historical phenomena has been ably demonstrated by a historian of the British Industrial Revolution, Robert Allen. Allen has made a strong case for the significance of high wages in Britain to the Industrial Revolution, using a database of historic wages for the cities of London, Amsterdam, Vienna, Florence, Beijing and Delhi.⁴ Based on the assumption that higher wages incentivise employers to replace labour with machines, Allen demonstrates the financial impetus for technological ingenuity and invention in Britain.

The appeal of Allen's analysis lies in the scale of comparison it allows. While the average British worker was by no means opulent, they were paid more than workers in other European cities, making higher wages a plausible explanation for the particularly British nature of the Industrial Revolution. But the definitions and proxies that Allen adopted in the study were a subject of debate. Jane Humphries argued that Allen's assumption of the calorific needs of the British working class at the time of the Industrial Revolution were too low, thus challenging Allen's conclusion that people had wages to spare after their expenditure on subsistence. Based on qualitative evidence, Humphries also claimed that the average family unit was larger than Allen assumed, which meant that the wages of a single male breadwinner had to stretch further among more children. In addition, the prevalence of absentee fathers meant that a male breadwinner was not always present.⁵ Since the past will always be a foreign country, and present-day historians are unable to identify entirely with the lifestyles of its inhabitants. It is important for quantitative historians to be transparent about the categories and proxies they choose and to be open to critique from those of a qualitative bent.

3. B. Freund, *Twentieth-Century South Africa: A Developmental History* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2018).

4. R. C. Allen, "Why the Industrial Revolution was British: Commerce, Induced Invention, and the Scientific Revolution", *The Economic History Review*, 64, 2, 2011, pp 357–84.

5. J. Humphries, "The Lure of Aggregates and the Pitfalls of the Patriarchal Perspective: A Critique of the High Wage Economy Interpretation of the British Industrial Revolution", *Economic History Review*, 66, 3, 2013, pp 693–714.

The recent proliferation of big data has opened a range of analytical possibilities. It is driven by the mass of data that an increasingly networked society has enabled through various internet platforms. One of these, which Fourie mentions, is neural networks, a technique currently used by practitioners of artificial intelligence. It is important to note that neural networks rely on longstanding statistical techniques. But they also prize conformity above all else. This is due to the underlying statistical methods, which urge the discovery of the mean by reducing of the distance between the otherwise scattered data points. This is a far cry from the social historian's more intimate concern with the lived experience of individuals and societies.

As Fourie writes, insights from other disciplines can be valuable to the project of history-writing. While economic historians are more likely to utilise quantitative methods, Economic History is not an exclusively quantitative field. The particularly economic nature of this lens warrants further examination. African historians began to study African economies seriously in the 1970s, with Antony Hopkins's *An Economic History of West Africa*, a pioneering work in African economic history.⁶ This and similar interventions went a long way to undoing the racist conception of African societies as primitive, timeless and unchanging by demonstrating that Africans responded to economic incentives and the opportunities proffered by global trade much like people anywhere else in the world. At the same time the primacy of economic motives within the studies of economic history contains the underlying assumption that people are motivated by the desire to maximise their self-interest, a supposition that historians of other persuasions might quibble with.

In conclusion I agree that there is value to historians in extending our reach wider towards the grander narratives of politics and the economy that have been neglected in the last forty years or so. While there is a variety of methods to choose from, particularly quantitative methods, it is important that historians be transparent and critical of the methodological limits of these.



6. A. G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (Longman, London, 1973).

Making people count: writing the history of the Dutch Cape

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The past is lost. As Robert Ross reminds us:

The past is dead and gone. What we can do is study material remains of the past which have been preserved into the present. And on the basis of which we make the attempt to reconstruct, we make intellectual constructs of what the past might have been like.¹

What we work with are the remnants of the past, most often ink on paper. Here the historian of the empire created by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) is truly fortunate. The massive administrative network of this merchant company constantly produced documents, and many copies of them, so that the paper empire of the VOC is spread over three continents, from the Netherlands to the Cape of Good Hope to Southeast Asia and beyond. Much of this data is both serial in nature (i.e., similar information, year after year, such as census records) and standardised across the empire (similar tax records, similar legal records, similar civil records such as marriage and birth registers). This makes it possible to do comparative history on a large scale within the framework of the VOC empire.

Historians of the VOC world have long been utilising these sources; in fact, a striking feature of VOC historiography is how much of it focuses on economic and administrative matters.² Even in South Africa, long before the revisionist historians of the 1970s and 1980s, pioneers of VOC Cape history have used serialised data to map out extensively the economic landscape of the seventeenth and eighteenth-century Cape. Under the leadership of P.J. van der Merwe, starting in the 1930s, two generations of students at Stellenbosch University compiled their MA theses on virtually every aspect of economic life at the Dutch Cape: ranging from grain and wine farming, to the history of fishing and forestry.³ Even when historians such as James C. Armstrong, Nigel

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1. R. Ross, "Comparisons and Ways Forward", in N. Worden (ed.), *Continent Lives: Social Identity and Material Culture in the VOC World* (Historical Studies Department, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 2007), p 611.
 2. For example, M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofs, *Asian Trade and European Influence in the Indonesian Archipelago between 1500 and about 1630* (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1962) and H. Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient, 1600–1800* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1976). This line of research culminated in the now standard work of E.M. Jacob, *Merchant in Asia: The Trade of the Dutch East India Company during the Eighteenth Century* (Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2006).
 3. On Van der Merwe's contribution, see J.S. Bergh, "P.J. (Piet) van der Merwe and D.J. (Dirk) Kotzé aan die Stuur by Stellenbosch, 1959–77: Goue Jare of Verspeelde Geleentede?", *Historia*, 53, 2, 2008. This line of research culminated in two publications based on magisterial works dealing with the Cape economy from the 1980s: D. Sleight, *Die Buiteposte: VOC-Buiteposte onder Kaapse Bestuur, 1652–1795*

Worden and Robert C.-H. Shell began investigating Cape slavery in the late 1970s, they did so chiefly via an economic lens, making extensive use of serial data such as ship records, sale records, tax records, household inventories and testaments. Their arguments and analyses were underpinned with statistical tables and graphs.⁴

Yet counting people is not the same as knowing them, or understanding their experiences. Johan Fourie admits that economists do not practise source criticism and do not question their data (p 11). Historians increasingly acknowledge that statistics – despite their “clinical” appearance in graphs and tables – are *not* objective: As Tim Rowse recently argued, the statistical table renders “difference in quantitative terms, representing peoples as if they were populations amenable/knowable to observing/managing authority”.⁵

Luckily, Cape historians soon realised that although the VOC’s paper archive is very much obsessed with serial sources, there is one large group of records that is amenable to qualitative analysis: court records. This being so, by the early 1980s Robert Ross and Nigel Worden started making use of these qualitative sources to write on topics such as slave life, discipline and resistance.⁶ It is my contention that it was this line of research, rather than the more cliometric approach, that resonated so much with the descendants of slaves in the Western Cape, and which made slavery an increasingly “hot” topic in the 1980s and 1990s.⁷ Likewise, the use of court records to reclaim aspects of the lived reality and mentalities of a wide range of people at the early Cape acted as an inspiration for a new generation of historians who were drawn to the rich archives of the VOC in the 1990s and early 2000s. This is behind the flowering of research into the VOC Cape over the past two decades.⁸ Using qualitative data in

(HAUM, Pretoria, 1993), based on his 1987 Stellenbosch doctoral thesis; and P. van Duin and R. Ross, *The Economy of the Cape Colony in the Eighteenth Century* (The Centre for the Study of European Expansion, Leiden, 1987).

4. J.C. Armstrong, “The Slaves, 1652–1795”, in R. Elphick and H. Giliomee (eds), *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652–1820* (Maskew Miller Longman, Cape Town, 1979); N. Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985), based on his 1982 Cambridge doctoral thesis; and R.C.-H. Shell, *Children of Bondage: A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652–1838* (Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 1994), based on his 1986 Yale University doctoral thesis.
5. T. Rowse, “The Statistical Table as Colonial Knowledge”, *Itinerario* 41, 1, 2017, p 68.
6. R. Ross, *Cape of Torments: Slavery and Resistance in South Africa* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1983); and Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa*, chapters 7 to 9.
7. K. Ward and N. Worden, “Commemorating, Suppressing and Invoking Cape Slavery”, in S. Nuttall and C. Coetzee (eds), *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1998); and N. Worden, “The Changing Politics of Slave Heritage in the Western Cape, South Africa”, *Journal of African History*, 501, 2009.
8. For a summary of the achievements of this scholarship, see G. Groenewald, “Culture and Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652–1795”, in T. Spear et al. (eds), *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History* (Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2020),

conjunction with the more traditional, quantitative data, historians have investigated how groups ranging from the VOC elite and free burghers to the underclasses consisting of slaves, soldiers and sailors, have performed their identities, dealt with their feelings about shame and honour, and expressed their loves and desires.⁹

It is only through having a fully-rounded view of human beings on the ground, and the way in which larger structural forces interacted with their personal agencies, that we can begin to know what it was like to be a young woman with a child born out-of-wedlock,¹⁰ a slave man whose jealousy over a beloved one drives him to violence, or a sailor who feels compelled to defend his honour in a duel. We should not just count people in the past; we must make them count and save them from “the enormous condescension of posterity”;¹¹ also from the serial data of the VOC archives, which reduce their rich and complex lives to mere numbers.



see online at <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.451> (accessed 20 February 2021).

9. See, among others, N. Worden (ed.), *Cape Town between East and West: Social Identities in a Dutch Colonial Town* (Jacana, Johannesburg, 2012); and P. Russell and N. Worden (eds), *Honourable Intentions? Violence and Virtue in Australian and Cape Colonies, c. 1750 to 1850* (Routledge, London and New York, 2016).
10. The history of pre-marital sex at the Cape is not “hidden”, as Fourie claims. There exists a sizeable historiography on this topic, from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, based on quantitative and qualitative data. See, among others, G. Groenewald, “‘A Mother Makes No Bastard’: Family Law, Sexual Relations and Illegitimacy in Dutch Colonial Cape Town, c. 1652–1795”, *African Historical Review*, 39, 2, 2007; and “‘Een Spoorloos Vrouwspersoon’: Unmarried Mothers, Moral Regulation and the Church at the Cape of Good Hope, circa 1652–1795”, *Historia*, 53, 2, 2008. See also V.C. Malherbe, “‘In Onegt Verwekt’: Law, Custom and Illegitimacy in Cape Town, 1800–1840”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 31, 1, 2005; and “Born into Bastardy: The Out-of-Wedlock Child in Early Victorian Cape Town”, *Journal of Family History*, 32, 1, 2007. Also S. Burman and M. Naude, “Bearing a Bastard: The Social Consequences of Illegitimacy in Cape Town, 1896–1939”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 17, 3, 1991.
11. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1980), p 12.

The place of History and historians

Jennifer Upton

The historian cannot do history without dealing with archives. Archives vary in form, as do the types of material that are taken as evidence and the manner historians engage with this evidence. But at its core, writing, narrating, or creating history is based on how the historian treats evidence. Given the variety of sources that can be used as evidence – among them oral history and memory, newspapers, minutes and newsletters, court documents, census records, ancient manuscripts, archaeological evidence, diaries, novels, financial records and, yes, statistics – the types of history (and historians) are many. The field of economic history, which is not limited to econometrics and quantitative methods, is one subset. Methodologies and theoretical frameworks have formed around historians' approaches to evidence, their convictions about the extent and limitations of what can be said about the past, and critical appraisals of the very frameworks they use, by placing them in their historical contexts: the history of History.

One of the crucial insights that *this* history can offer the field of digital humanities (and historians) is the awareness that all researchers enter conversations that span time and geography. Our findings are contingent – they have a genealogy – and our methods have a history. This means that archives are not simply repositories from which to extract information, a territory to be conquered. They come into being within political contexts, influenced by state, society, and individuals. The narrative a scholar might glean from an archive depends on the questions that are asked.

There are questions that numbers do not answer. Just as sources do not “speak for themselves”, neither do numbers or statistics. They require attention and interpretation. Scholars therefore need to consider, as Jill Lepore asks, “what kind of knowledge numbers add up to, and subtract”.¹ Measurements of societal trends and human behaviour told through numbers “are subject to intense ideological debates about what, in fact, they do measure”, as Khalil Gibran Muhammed has pointed out.² The deployment of quasi-empiricism to justify racist, dehumanising policies in South Africa, the United States, and elsewhere is well documented.³ The point here is not that one approach is more likely than another to be used in bad faith: it is that scholars need

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1. J. Lepore, “Detection of Deception”, *The Last Archive* (podcast), 2020. See <https://www.thelastarchive.com/season-1/episode-2-detection-of-deception> (accessed 27 January 2021).
 2. K.G. Muhammed, “How Numbers Lie: Intersectional Violence and the Quantifications of Race”, Lecture, Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Cambridge: MA, 25 February 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=br0ZYTGuW9M&t=415s> (accessed 27 January 2021).
 3. S. Dubow, *Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995); and *A Commonwealth of Knowledge: Science, Sensibility, and White South Africa 1820–2000* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006).

to apply a similarly critical lens to all types of data and recognise the processes involved in acquiring them.

The tools of the digital humanities offer intriguing research possibilities that were not previously available. For example, *Enslaved: Peoples of the Historical Slave Trade* is an online portal that brings together digital databases containing over half a million records relating to the Atlantic slave trade, so that biographical information about enslaved people can be pieced together from records in different archives and data sets.⁴ With the relative novelty of big data and digital humanities methodologies, it is incumbent on researchers to develop a rigorous ethical framework for their scholarship. Novelty notwithstanding, the digital humanities are also subject to the evidentiary obligations that historians have long debated: what can we say about the past? On what basis are we making our claims?

Looming over the invitation to historians to make themselves “count” – in Fourie’s formulation, by applying quantitative methods, complicating simplistic narratives, asking bolder research questions and, ultimately, shaping national policy – are the power structures of contemporary academia. The question of the university’s place and purpose in society is both economic and social, and is being debated in and beyond South Africa. To receive state funding, universities are expected to justify their economic value, with students increasingly being positioned as customers in a knowledge economy. Academics, too, are pressured to participate in this model of their work’s value, in which research “counts” by the number of articles published and funding grants awarded, and learning is made measurable by positive student surveys and post-university employment. Under the so-called marketisation of the university, humanities departments face particular pressure to prove their value. Combined with the competitiveness of the academic job market and the precarity of contractual employment within it, these factors point to a different kind of crisis: one whose solution would not only require historians to advocate for the worth of their discipline, but for colleagues, university administrators, and policy makers to recognise and defend it.

An alternative to the intellectual marketplace Fourie describes, in which historians need to promote their wares for the survival of their craft, is the challenging and rewarding space of truly interdisciplinary discussion. The lively History and African Studies Seminar, which ran at the Durban campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal from 1996 to the late 2000s, was one such example.⁵ In addition to those working within the traditional disciplinary boundaries of historical studies, the seminar series drew in students, anthropologists, political scientists, community activists, literary

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4. M. Solly, “Who Were America’s Enslaved? A New Database Humanizes the Names behind the Numbers”, *Smithsonian Magazine*, 22 December 2020 at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/sweeping-new-digital-database-emphasizes-enslaved-peoples-individuality-180976513>; and “Enslaved: Peoples of the Historical Slave Trade”, at <https://enslaved.org> (accessed 27 January 2021).
 5. Archive of the History and African Studies Seminar, at <https://phambo.wiser.org.za> (accessed 27 January 2021).

scholars, sociologists, economists, archivists, clinician-scholars, nurses and others from the region and internationally. The robust debate in these seminars did not override their general sense of collegiality – collegiality not as a strategic metric of academic success, but a mark of mutual respect and intellectual curiosity.

Like artefacts, our narrated histories are created and fashioned, remnants of lives which cannot be replicated. The methodologies of social history can offer insight into quantitative approaches, revealing their contexts and influences – reminding us that those who produce history are also subject to its processes.



Must historians count to count?

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For the survival of History as a discipline, and for the “good health and prosperity” of the social sciences in general, Johan Fourie urges historians “to travel to neighbouring and distant human, social and natural sciences, to learn their tools and techniques, and to use them to answer ambitious research questions”. “This will not only make the field of history stronger”, he argues, but also “prevent their annexation in future”. This argument assumes that History is facing a serious crisis and Fourie suggests that if South African historians do not heed his advice, the discipline is in danger of becoming irrelevant. Although concluding that history is important, he suggests that the best way to make historians count is by taking up the challenge to expand their methodological tool kit. To buttress this point, Fourie cites Stanley Trapido’s reminder that:

...the most daunting aspect of analysing society, whether in its historical dimension or its present structure, is an awareness that much of what we write must sooner or later be faulted by different and more satisfactory methods of using evidence.¹

It is unsurprising that Fourie cites Trapido, having first presented the article published in this issue as a paper at a seminar series named after Stanley Trapido.² Presented before an audience made up predominantly of historians (although some colleagues from the Department of Economics were present), the paper invited interesting discussion. Fourie’s decision to publish his challenge to historians to “be open to new sources and methods of analysing them” invites equally vibrant engagement. He encourages historians to be “wary of economists who just train students in mathematics, or historians who abolish courses that take students into the archive”, but more than that, Fourie’s departure point is that historians are not doing enough to make themselves count. But to be clear, although Fourie’s point on “academic trade” between History and other disciplines is broad, his major concern focuses on economic history, particularly his assumption of the novelty of big data. As far as he is concerned, contemporary historical writing can now be faulted on the basis of more satisfactory methods of using big data.

In responding to Fourie’s challenge, I engage the following points underpinning his argument: first, that History is in crisis, facing the risk of becoming irrelevant and being annexed. Secondly, I challenge the argument’s methodological assumptions and fallacies about the interdisciplinary limits of history. Thirdly, I demonstrate that what Fourie presents as novel methodological developments with respect to big data are in fact nothing new, and had his appeal engaged more deeply with the history of such debates, this would have been clear. Finally, on the basis of the above analysis, I suggest that Fourie’s call to historians says more about the limitations of Economics as a

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1. S. Trapido, “South Africa and the Historians”, *African Affairs*, 71, 285, 1972, pp 444-448.
 2. Tinashe Nyamunda chaired the seminar in which Johan Fourie presented “Making Historians Count”, at the University of the Free State in March 2019.

discipline, at least on the basis of his article, than it does about the challenges that History faces as a discipline.

To be or not to be counted! Is that the question?

By discussing how to make “South African historians count”, Fourie uses a clever play on words. The word “count” can be used in multiple ways based on its different meanings. As a transitive verb, it can mean either add up, enumerate, ascertain the sum of or account. As an intransitive verb, it can refer to one who has value, importance or influence, among other meanings. It can also be used as a noun to represent the act of counting, among other meanings.³ In his work, Fourie appears to use the word both as a transitive and intransitive verb as well as, in some cases, a noun. For example, at one point, he suggests that historians can make themselves count by acquiring quantitative skills such as using Optical Character Recognition techniques to capture and date photographs or data processing software to capture historical statistics. In another context, he uses the term “count” to depict value. Either way, Fourie’s suggestion is that for historians to be valued, to stand up among the social sciences and “be counted”, they must include in their methodological tool kit the ability “to count” – that is, incorporate quantitative techniques.

History is one of the most receptive disciplines in the humanities. This is particularly because it is among the most interdisciplinary of the humanities. Without immediately invoking Richard J. Evans’s *In Defence of History*, historians are open to embracing invitations to novel methodological approaches.⁴ Fourie is not incorrect to point out that historians can only enrich the discipline if they incorporate large data sets, statistics and computational methods. If History is indeed the mother of all disciplines, why should historians not embrace methodological eclecticism? To be clear, there is nothing to lose and more to gain by imploring historians to incorporate Fourie’s suggestions in their work to attract a variety of readers and students.

Indeed, any student of the history of climate change, for example, would benefit immensely by using a variety of data sets, including isotope and landscape analysis as well as geographic information systems, among others.⁵ Others in cognate disciplines, such as Archaeology, which make use of historical methods, grapple with similar issues of methodological “trading”, to borrow Fourie’s term.⁶ To make sense of some of their findings, archaeologists borrow or incorporate methods used in Palaeontology, and a

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3. *Collins English Dictionary*, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/count> (accessed 5 February 2021).
 4. R. J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (Granta Books, London, 1997).
 5. See, for example, I.N. Gregory and P.S. Ell, *Historical GIS: Technologies, Methodologies and Scholarship* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007).
 6. See, for example, G. Carver, “Archaeology and History, the History of Archaeology, and the Archaeology of Archaeology”, in A. Baeriswyl, G. Descoedres, M. Stercken and D. Wild (eds), *Die mittelalterliche Stadt erforschen: Archäologie und Geschichte im Dialog*, (Schweizerische Burgenverein, Basel, 2009), pp 43–52.

range of anthropological methods. Being methodologically eclectic, Fourie suggests, especially where counting is concerned, will allow historians to ask bold, new, ambitious and important research questions.

Although presented as a call to History in general, Fourie's emphasis on the data revolution must be viewed in the context of debates on the new economic history of Africa. In 2009, Antony G. Hopkins published a pathbreaking study that traced the developments in African economic history in the 1980s, following both a decline in interest and the rise of postmodernism as well as the shift from material towards cultural considerations.⁷ It was only in the 2000s, with the rise of "new institutional history" spurred by Darren Acemoglu, Simon Johnson and James A. Robinson that renewed interest in African poverty was triggered by economists.⁸ Although Hopkins celebrated the bold attempts to revisit the African economic past and encouraged historians to take up the challenge to engage "new institutional history", he was equally critical of the methodologies used, which were replete with problematic assumptions and the use of poor data which not only misrepresented that African past, but also flattened its history.⁹

As Hopkins made his call for a revival of interest in African economic history, scholars such as Gareth Austin and others established the African Economic History Network (AEHN), which began meeting annually at the London School of Economics (LSE) between 2005 and 2011 before being hosted by other universities thereafter.¹⁰ This ultimately led to the publication in 2014 of a special issue in an international journal dedicated entirely to the economic history of Africa. It covered a wide range of topics including population and growth, national income accounting and the economy, the Ghana cocoa take-off, rubber production in Nigeria, anthropometrics and living standards, comparative growth at the Cape and currency in Liberia and Sierra Leone, among others. The *Economic History Review* stimulated an economic history approach to the study of the African economic past, not based on "limited or illustrative use of numbers", but more strikingly, on "systematic presentation of time series, often painstakingly recovered from archival sources and processed into a consistent data set".¹¹ Using quantitative and, in some cases, regression analysis, the issue represented for the members of the AEHN a revival in interest in African economic history that

7. A.G. Hopkins, "The New Economic History of Africa", *Journal of African History*, 50, 2009, pp 155-177.

8. See D. Acemoglu, S. Johnson and J. A. Robinson, "The Colonial Origins of Comparative Development: An Empirical Investigation", *American Economic Review*, 91, 5, 2001, pp 1369-1401.

9. Hopkins, "The New Economic History of Africa"; See also the work of G. Austin.

10. See "African Economic History Network", at <https://www.aehnnetwork.org/conference> (accessed 5 February 2021). The AEHN was to be hosted by the International Studies Group at the University of the Free State from 21-23 September 2020. However, because of the Covid-19 pandemic and the global lockdown it has caused, the meeting has been postponed to 2021.

11. G. Austin and S. Broadberry, "Introduction: The Renaissance of African Economic History", *Economic History Review*, 67, 4, 2014, p 18.

would trigger more sustainable and continuous research outputs in top international economic history journals. But this revival, as Austin and Broadberry's introduction to the 2014 African economic history special issue in the *Economic History Review* shows in its bibliography, was predominantly led by European scholars with the exception of the mention of Kenneth Dike, Joseph Inikori and Johan Fourie.¹²

Even as the revival of African economic history took off in Europe following the fascinating work of the AEHN and its members, the conversation did not expand to African historians at universities in sub-Saharan Africa to any significant degree until the footprint of the AEHN expanded. I learned about it in 2011 and managed to secure funding from its organisers when they held a conference at Lund University in 2013, after which I have tried to attend as many of the network's meetings as I can, including helping to organise its forthcoming conference to be held at the University of the Free State in 2021. However, its expansion to Africa has been by involving scholars such as Wapumuluka Mulwafu of the University of Malawi, Ushewhedu Kufakurinani of the University of Zimbabwe, and Johan Fourie of the University of Stellenbosch. Of these scholars, Fourie's background as an economist allowed him not only to contribute to the *Economic History Review's* special issue that announced the "revival of African economic history", but to encourage the use of quantitative methods as a new way forward. Fourie was a central figure in the launching of the Laboratory for the Economics of Africa's Past (LEAP) in 2015. According to its website, LEAP "is dedicated to the quantitative study of African economic and social history".¹³ Affiliated to the Economics Department at Stellenbosch, it consolidates scholars "interested in understanding and explaining the long-term economic development of Africa's diverse societies".¹⁴

Fourie's call to "make historians count" is informed by this background, which forms part of his broad intellectual project. In 2017, Fourie became president of the Economic History Society of South Africa (EHSSA). According to the LEAP newspaper, the "chief purpose of EHSSA is to promote economic history research at universities in Southern Africa".¹⁵ Its main mouthpiece is the *Economic History of Developing Regions*

12. Austin and Broadberry, "Introduction: The Renaissance of African Economic History". Of these African scholars, Johan Fourie is an economist by training. A look at the board of the AEHN also shows that the majority of its members are not from, or resident on the African continent. Of the 18 members on the board, only three are black Africans and only three, including Johan Fourie, work at African universities. This suggests the need for a bit more representation.

13. "Laboratory for the Economics of Africa's Past", at <https://leap Stellenbosch.org.za> (accessed 5 February 2021).

14. "Laboratory for the Economics of Africa's Past".

15. "Fourie voted EHSSA President", *The LEAP Times*, 1, May 2018 at <https://leap Stellenbosch.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/LEAP-Newsletter-1.pdf> (accessed 5 February 2021).

journal.¹⁶ Having secured Mellon Foundation funding of US\$860 000 for five years in 2017 for LEAP's Biography of an Uncharted People project, Fourie led "the construction of large datasets and digital technologies for historical research".¹⁷ This project was hosted at Stellenbosch, where Fourie and colleagues could recruit postgraduate students working, in part, on this project.¹⁸ As such, Fourie was well positioned not only to advance the expansion of African economic history, but also to influence a particular quantitative methodology of doing history. His intention was clear from as early as 2016 when he called for the use of big data in Africa.¹⁹

But despite his consistent calls to historians to acknowledge "new" African economic history and adopt its methodologies, few historians beyond LEAP have adopted it across South Africa and the region. While the editors of the 2014 special issue of the *Economic History Review* were confident that there would be a sustained revival of interest in the discipline, this was not the case for quantitative economic history across Southern Africa. This is the context in which, six years later, Fourie is reaching out to historians to adopt quantitative methods. His is not just a call, but a warning that if historians do not count (adopt quantitative research methods), they will cease to count (be relevant) and therefore risk having their discipline taken over. But do historians need to count to be counted? These are the critical questions that Fourie has left some historians asking. Is economic history only defined by the kinds of methodologies that Fourie is promoting? The next section engages with these issues.

Big data, the politics of knowledge production and the struggle for disciplinary control

The question of whose interest in African economic history was revived by Hopkins's 2009 call is crucial. It is critical to our understanding of the politics, and sometimes, the location, of knowledge production. Hopkins correctly identified the rise of economic history in the global north in the 1960s, its growth with the 1973 publication of his *An Economic History of West Africa*, culminating around 1987 with the publication of Ralph Austen's work.²⁰ Hopkins argued that with the rise of postmodernism and the cultural turn in the 1990s, historians had then abolished the study of poverty in Africa. As a

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16. See the Economic History of Developing Regions website: <http://www.ehssa.org.za/index.php/economic-history-of-developing-regions> (accessed 5 February 2021).
 17. "Mellon Funded Project Kicks off", *The LEAP Times*, 1, May 2018.
 18. "Mellon Funded Project Kicks off".
 19. J. Fourie, "The Data Revolution in African Economic History", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 47, 2, 2016, pp 193–212.
 20. A.G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (Longman, London, 1973). A second edition was published recently by Routledge in 2019; R. Austen, *African Economic History: Internal Development and External Dependency* (James Currey, London, 1987). Other books published later but only viewed as standing out in a context of declining economic history include P.T. Zeleza, *A Modern Economic History of Africa, Vol 1, The Nineteenth Century* (CODESRIA, Dakar, 1993); and Feinstein, *An Economic History of South Africa*.

result, Hopkins suggests, the new approaches to history resulted in a mix of “remote and unhistorical” positivist economic history (that had abandoned materialism and macro historical projects), “and cultural analysis, which was removed from cultural considerations and, though historical in intent, was sometimes defective in its use of historical sources”, resulting in the languishing of economic history.²¹ Even though Hopkins’s assessment is not incorrect, he may not have been aware of developments taking place in other places on the African continent.

At around the time identified by Hopkins as the high point of economic history followed by its decline in Zimbabwe, the discipline crystallised into a stand-alone department at the University of Zimbabwe. While it had hitherto existed as part of broader historical studies within the History Department, there was a clique of historians such as Joseph Mtisi, Victor Machingaidze, Alois Mlambo and others who were behind the establishment of the discipline. Within South Africa, from 2001, the work of the Wits History Workshop, has dealt with many economic and social history issues, perhaps most notably associated with the late Belinda Bozzoli. Moreover, economic historian Bill Freund had taken up the chair of Economic History at the University of Natal in 1985.²² I mentioned earlier that Hopkins made a call for the revival of African economic history in 2009, and rightly so. Hopkins’s 1973 text was a classic, but there have been others since. Freund’s 1984 study, *The Making of Contemporary Africa*, was among the important books that would be followed by other studies on African economic history, for example, his own *The African Worker*.²³ Other scholars were also making important contributions in different parts of the continent. Ian Phimister’s work on Hwange Colliery and the economic and social history of Zimbabwe and Alois Mlambo’s studies on the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme and others stand out as important publications in the late 1980s and 1990s.²⁴ Furthermore, scholars, such as Thandika Mkandawire and Paul Tiyambe

21. Hopkins, “The New Economic History of Africa”, p 157.

22. See an obituary of Professor Freund by Robert Morrell, “Bill Freund (1944–2020): Pioneering Economic Historian of Africa and South Africa”, *Maverick Citizen*, 21 August 2020, at <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-08-21-bill-freund-1944-2020-pioneering-economic-historian-of-africa-and-south-africa> (accessed 5 February 2021).

23. B. Freund, *The Making of Contemporary Africa* (Macmillan, London, 1984); and B. Freund, *The African Worker* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988).

24. In addition to a great many journal articles by these and other scholars of African economic history, see especially, I. Phimister, *An Economic and Social History of Zimbabwe to 1948: Capital Accumulation and Class Struggle* (Longman, London, 1988); and I. Phimister, *Coal, Capital and Labour in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1894–1954* (Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 1994). See also A. Mlambo, *The Economic Structural Adjustment Programme: The Case of Zimbabwe* (University of Zimbabwe Press, Harare, 2000); and A. Mlambo, I. Phimister and E. Pangeti, *Zimbabwe: A History of Manufacturing, 1890–1995* (University of Zimbabwe Press, Harare, 2000). Also P. Bond, *Uneven Zimbabwe: A Study of Finance, Development and Underdevelopment* (Africa World Press, Trenton, 1988), among others.

Zezeza, both from Malawi, were leading figures in the discipline.²⁵ There are numerous examples of work produced between the 1980s and the 2000s on the economic history of Africa that could be mentioned here. And yet the narrative that has been presented by Fourie is that African economic history went into decline until the call for its revival in the 2000s. Thus, the critical question is: why, despite all this work produced, is this his claim?

History, and economic history in particular, was quite healthy in certain parts of the continent and certainly in no danger of being annexed. If anything, the 1980s and 1990s were the golden age of African economic history at some South African and Zimbabwean universities as evident in the work of many African scholars published in history journals in this period. The work of leading scholars throughout the 1980s and 1990s attests to this, and perhaps this is something Fourie could have considered. The issue of the revival of African economic history, more specifically, must be properly contextualised based on where the call was made in 2009. To some degree, this speaks to the issue of the politics of knowledge production. When Hopkins made the call for the revival of the discipline, he was correct to do so. But I think it important to identify that the discipline had declined *within the context of Europe* (my emphasis). Yet, the work being done in Africa was nowhere near as visible as it ought to have been in the USA and Europe. The call for the “revival” of African economic history amongst scholars in Europe resulted in a conversation that finally drew in African students and some scholars at AEHN meetings, where the disconnect was confronted. Nowhere was this clearer than when it led to the publication of a debate about the state of African economic history in the continent. This is the subject of the following section.

History, methodology and debates about what African economic history is and should be

The special issue of the *Economic History Review* appeared in 2014, around the time that debates on “reviving” economic history emerged. Among the most important journals leading this revival on the continent was the *Economic History of Developing Regions*, housed at Stellenbosch University. But one look at the editorial board reveals the extent to which there is more global North influence than there is African representation. Moreover, the number of articles published by African scholars, not least those based at African universities in the last ten years, is miniscule.²⁶ By their own admission, the representation of African authors in European and American economic history journals is very limited. Fourie and Leigh Gardner heeded the call for the revival of interest in the discipline and they were puzzled by the limited

25. T. Mkandawire and C.C. Soludo, *Our Continent, Our Future: African Perspectives on Structural Adjustment* (Africa World Press, Dakar, 1998); and P.T. Zezeza, *A Modern Economic History of Africa, Volume 1: The Nineteenth Century* (Codesria Book Series, Dakar, 1993).

26. To Fourie’s credit, the use of numbers could have been illustrative here as part of the methodology. I left out the figures deliberately, to demonstrate that while they are sometimes important, qualitative texts can also be an important consideration in telling a story.

contributions from African scholars to mainstream economic history journals.²⁷ But Fourie and Gardner attracted the interest and response of Erik Green and Pius Nyambara, who challenged the notion that interest in the history of African economies had declined in the 1980s and 1990s.²⁸

Green and Nyambara's argument was straightforward. They argued that far from declining, African economic history had actually flourished in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. What was viewed as a puzzle could simply be explained by methodological differences between what Fourie saw as African economic history, and the practice at African universities. This also influenced the outlets in which African scholars published. Many of the studies on the African economic past had been informed by qualitative methodological approaches, using material found in archives, and interviews, among other sources. As a result, they tended to be published in History journals rather than those devoted solely to economic history. Some of the studies published by US and western European-based scholars tended to be based on quantitative methodologies. Studies based on qualitative methodologies submitted by African scholars tended to be rejected for not conforming closely enough to the standards of economic history practice, because they were not based on robust, rigorous, big quantitative data sets and methodologies. For example, I submitted an article to a local South African economic history journal and it was rejected on these grounds – only to be accepted immediately in a history journal.²⁹ At the heart of the debate on what constitutes economic history is methodology and the question of what informs it. Are “counting” and the use of statistical methods the sole determinants of what defines the discipline? Could Fourie have weighed other considerations? What is clear though, is that the big data techniques Fourie views as novel may well be new in terms of some developments, but quantitative versus qualitative methodologies have always been central to debates over what constitutes economic history.³⁰

From the Annales School from the 1930s to the cliometrics of the 1970s, the call for historians to count is only the latest manifestation of debates by economic-minded scholars to influence history methodologies. In fact, Hopkins's 2009 call for the revival of economic history was, in part, a critique of the new institutional economists' use of quantitative methods, which he viewed as “flattening” history.³¹ One of the founding members of the AEHN, Gareth Austin, was equally concerned, although a little more accepting of the possibilities that could arise from using both qualitative and quantitative methods. But both Austin and Stephen Broadberry were clear about the

27. J. Fourie and L. Gardner, “The Internationalisation of Economic History: A Puzzle”, *Economic History of Developing Regions*, 29, 1, 2014, pp 1–14.

28. E. Green and P. Nyambara, “The Internationalisation of Economic History: Perspectives from the African Frontier”, *Economic History of Developing Regions*, 29, 1, 2014, pp 68–78.

29. See T. Nyamunda, “The State and Black Development: The Small Enterprises Development Corporation and the Politics of Indigenization and Economic Empowerment in Zimbabwe”, *Historia*, 61, 1, 2016, pp 41–65.

30. See, for example, Fourie, “The Data Revolution in African Economic History”.

31. Hopkins, “The New Economic History of Africa”.

renaissance of the discipline: although there was renewed interest amongst European historians of African economic history, this interest simply reflected the new frontiers in a discipline that had long thrived, despite the slump of the previous two or so decades.³² Indeed, in the 1960s and 1970s, for example, both quantitative and theoretical debates had raged on the contours of the discipline.

Among the most prominent of these debates were those between Giovanni Arrighi and William J. Barber on the question of the development of central African economies.³³ Within South Africa, some of these debates had been informed by writing in the liberal school and the rise of social history in the 1970s. Freund captured these debates well in his contribution to Vishnu Padayachee's edited book, *The Political Economy of Africa*, particularly noting the Marxist challenges to neo-classical mainstream economics.³⁴ In the case of central Africa, Barber adopted a model from W. Arthur Lewis's 1954 study on economic development with unlimited labour supplies.³⁵ The model was to some degree suited to a European context. Lewis suggested that economic development takes place under certain conditions. In a context where a developing urban industrial economy is growing, labour moves voluntarily from a traditional, less developed sector to the capitalist sector, thus triggering development until a level of full employment has been attained. Barber applied the same model in the context of Southern and Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland, and suggested that the same would apply, with labour moving from the traditional or "primitive" African sector to the European capitalist sector, triggering colonial development until a level of full employment and economic development had been attained. Such was the influence of neo-classical mainstream economics. The theories and arguments were buttressed by numbers, tables and other econometric tools.

Arrighi challenged and convincingly dismissed the suggestion of a two-sector model in which there was a traditional and more developed capitalist sector, and secondly, the suggestion that labour moved "voluntarily" from a "primitive" region of "low productivity" to that of "high productivity" in the European sector. He argued that theories which were applied without context, even if they were accompanied by robust numbers, were misleading. In his rebuttal, he historicised the labour supply in Southern Rhodesia. His study found that prior to the colonisation of Southern Rhodesia by the British, Africans were highly productive and engaged in a degree of gainful trade. Even after the arrival of settler Europeans, commercial activity by Africans became a vent for surplus as they became a market for agricultural and other products. But for

32. See, for example, Austin and Broadberry, "Introduction: The Renaissance of African Economic History".

33. W.J. Barber, *The Economy of British Central Africa: A Case Study of Economic Development in a Dualistic Society* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1961); G. Arrighi, "Labour Supplies in a Historical Perspective: A Study of the Proletarianization of the African Peasantry in Rhodesia", *Journal of Development Studies*, 6, 3, 1970, pp 197–234.

34. B. Freund, "The Social Context of African Economics Growth, 1960–2008", in V. Padayachee (ed.), *The Political Economy of Africa* (Routledge, London, 2010) pp 39–59.

35. W.A. Lewis, "Economic Development with Unlimited Labour Supplies", *The Manchester School*, 22, 2, 1954, pp 139–191.

Europeans to subdue Africans and subject them to the labour requirements of a colonial state, meant that the productive and competitive Africans had to lose their means of production. Arrighi's findings were extended by Charles Van Onselen's 1976 study, *Chibaro*.³⁶ He showed that because of a shortage of labour, the colonial state engaged in forced labour, and ultimately imposed monetised taxes to obligate Africans to work for European enterprises, instead of for themselves. When these measures failed and Africans remained productive and in continued competition with white colonial enterprises, the state ultimately took away the Africans' means of production through the Land Apportionment Act (1930), which reallocated the majority of the productive land to white settlers while Africans were displaced to overcrowded, infertile reserves.

The same observations were made in the case of South Africa. Scholars such as Ben Magubane traced the historical dynamics of race and class that resulted in white settlers getting the balance of the land and other economic resources, with Africans being pushed to the reserves and ultimately the so-called "homelands" or Bantustans.³⁷ As Sol Plaatje's work demonstrated, the Native Land Act (1913) had a devastating impact on African livelihoods and heritage.³⁸ The colonial state ensured that Africans were subject to colonial and repressive apartheid laws. The bigger point is that labour supplies to the so-called capitalist sector were manufactured by various colonial laws and state acts.

The suggestion of what is modern has also been contested, as has the notion of what is capitalist, when placed under historical scrutiny. Donald Denoon suggested that what we have seen in countries such as the Rhodesias and colonial and apartheid South Africa is not liberal capitalism based on free enterprise, but actually settler capitalism based on racial segregation and repressive measures that subjected unwilling Africans to violent colonial rule which they had to challenge through various liberation struggles.³⁹

Importantly, to be effective, the use of numbers, regression analysis and statistical tools should also be specific and contextual. Quantitative historical analysis, especially by economists, has been used to create economic indicators to measure development, for example the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and statistics to measure poverty, as well as other sets of tools to manage economies such as the National Income Accounting (NIA) system. In a 2011 article, Daniel Speich argued that these were global abstractions which were not well suited to directing development.⁴⁰ Such approaches

36. C. van Onselen, *Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia, 1900–1933* (Pluto Press, London, 1976).

37. B. Magubane, *The Political Economy of Race and Class in South Africa* (Monthly Review Press, London, 1979).

38. S. Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa* (Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 1916).

39. D. Denoon, *Settler Capitalism: The Dynamics of Dependent Development in the Southern Hemisphere* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1983).

40. D. Speich, "The Use of Global Abstractions: National Income Accounting in the Period of Imperial Decline", *Journal of Global History*, 6, 1, 2011, pp 7–28.

were downright dangerous when applied to policymaking, as Alden Young found in the case of Sudan.⁴¹ He shows that the pursuit of positive GDP and other indices is highly problematic. Following its independence in 1956, Sudan found itself having to pursue high modernist projects such as the Gezira Scheme, amongst others, in a bid to expand cotton production for export and thus increase its US dollar earnings. Its economic experts were so concerned about increasing the production of exports that they forgot to consider several factors, one of which was the development of other options such as synthetic fibres, which reduced the price and demand of cotton globally. Yet the country had already borrowed a great deal of money to support this monoculture economy, landing it into serious debt that it could not settle and plunging the country into economic crisis.⁴² In that context, the econometric tools that economics experts applied were highly problematic, no matter how robust they assumed their numbers were or what their models predicted.⁴³ Their numbers would have been more useful if they had considered the skills of other disciplines that emphasise agency, and other relevant issues.

The statement by Stanley Trapido that Fourie quotes is useful to buttress the point I am making. Analysing society both historically and in “its present structure” requires a mix of satisfactory methods and good evidence. This is true. However, where Fourie and I disagree is on our interpretation of what Trapido meant, both by good evidence and satisfactory methods. For Fourie, historians will “count” (remain relevant), only if they are made to “count” (use numbers and other statistical methods). He may not be incorrect in advocating the greater adoption and incorporation of “numbers” in historical research. But I argue that Trapido would have disagreed with Fourie’s contention that this would make historians “count”.

History is much more than just numbers. If anything, if used incorrectly and in isolation, numbers can lead to ahistorical studies, as Hopkins’s critical analysis of the work of new institutional scholars revealed in his well-received call to revive interest in African economic history. In fact, his warning to historians was that if they did not take control of the discipline and engage in debates about optimal methodologies informing their studies, the “flattened” work such as that of Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson would become the mainstream idea of what African economic history is.⁴⁴ In many ways, Fourie’s call to study history by numbers mimics such approaches. At the heart of my argument is the question of what history is, as opposed to what Fourie suggests it should be. Inasmuch as numbers are important, qualitative evidence from archives, interviews, and other sources, and the various methods that historians are

41. A. Young, *Transforming Sudan: Decolonization, Economic Development and State Formation* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2019).

42. A. Young, “African Bureaucrats and the Exhaustion of the Developmental State: Lessons from the Pages of the Sudanese Economist”, *Humanity*, 8, 1, 2017, pp 49–75.

43. For a more comprehensive critique, see X. Lu and H. White, “Robustness Checks and Robustness Tests in Applied Economics”, *Journal of Econometrics*, 178, 1, 2014, pp 194–206.

44. See Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson, “The Colonial Origins of Comparative Development”.

trained to adopt, ensure that history continues to be the main subject that guides research and teaching and learning in the humanities.

Conclusion: Is the crisis in History/economic history or Economics?

Johan Fourie's call to make historians count is problematic in several ways. The reasons for this are: firstly, his assumption that historians are unaware of this necessity, and secondly, that History is in danger of being taken over if it does not adapt. By its very nature, History is eclectic. To historians, this is the most obvious characteristic of the discipline! We have, for instance, all sorts of sub-disciplines. Fourie has been involved in economic history, to which his call may to some degree be most relevant. But there is also political history, social history, environmental history, gender history, the history of emotions, medical history – the list could go on.

By their very nature, these forms of history utilise all sorts of methods to inform their studies, but not all of them need numbers at their core for them to be counted. This point is particularly important, given that Fourie's call appears to be aimed at all historians, not just those in economic history, of which he is a part. Another important aspect to consider is that some specialties also cross fields, for example, historical sociology or anthropology, or even political and economic history.

There is also no question that academic history faces a perennial funding challenge. It appears that to this extent, economics may be more privileged compared to the discipline of History. To his credit, Fourie's LEAP has enjoyed support from generous funders and many international partnerships.⁴⁵ Elsewhere on the continent, Leonard Wantchekon has established a mainstream economics-based university in Benin with the support of Princeton University and other international partners.⁴⁶ Catering for students from West Africa, the African School of Economics also has as one of its main programmes, quantitative economic history.⁴⁷ Unlike academic history, economic studies are very well funded. What makes the programmes so attractive is that the graduates sometimes land lucrative positions as experts in the World Bank and other multi-lateral and development and policy advising institutions. While the lack of such funding for history constitutes a crisis of sorts, I am not sure it would be in the way Fourie suggests. For a long time, History has not been considered an important subject in primary and secondary schools as the science, technology, engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) subjects. But following the 2008 xenophobic attacks in South

45. See the LEAP website for more information. This is an excellent academic initiative that Fourie must be celebrated for. Whatever academic perspectives one may have of the programme, Fourie has used its success to fund and support many young academics who have gone on to have successful academic careers across the world. See "Laboratory for the Economics of Africa's Past", at <https://leapstellenbosch.org.za>

46. For the story of Professor Leonard Wantchekon, see I. Dieng, "Ground Breaker", *IMF Finance & Development*, 53, 2, 2016 at <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2016/12/people.htm> (accessed 5 February 2021).

47. See the website of the African School of Economics, 2021, at <https://africanschoolofeconomics.com> (accessed 5 February 2021).

Africa, the Department of Basic Education formed the History Ministerial Task Team to oversee the compulsory inclusion of History in the Further Education and Training phase and strengthen the History content in the General Education and Training band. Notwithstanding any limitations of the programme, the importance of History to identity, nation-building, and critical citizenship, among other considerations, is not in doubt.⁴⁸ To this extent, at least – and there are other important contexts worth exploring – History will always count. I suppose the question at this stage is why economists feel that History does not count and is in danger of being annexed.

With the global crash of 2008, the discipline of Economics came under attack for failing to anticipate the recession.⁴⁹ After all, econometrics techniques are designed to forecast just this, whereas historians are generally sensitive to the reality that history never moves in a straight line, and would usually shy away from making predictions. But following the crash, economists once again recognised the importance of history, recalling the 1930s global recession, for example. Many took up economic history, but not being fully conversant in its methods and discourses, applied neo-classical methods to its study. For many economists, whose studies tend to be based on temporal phenomena, it seemed novel. The call for historians to count appears to have emerged from this background.

Moreover, even as there have been calls to decolonise humanities curricula across the world, there have been more specific calls to rethink economics. Indeed, organisations such as Rethinking Economics (which also has a South African chapter based at Wits University and a Zimbabwean chapter based at the University of Zimbabwe) have become influential globally.⁵⁰ Other organisations, such as the Institute for New Economic Thinking (INET), have funded actions such as the Young Scholars Initiative and made contributions from its Africa working group.⁵¹ Instead of calling on other disciplines to adopt their methodologies, they have instead embraced the wisdom they can learn from other disciplines.

So, the call from Fourie, for me, appears to be based less on the need for History to count than the question of relevance in the discipline of economics, which finds itself, in many ways and despite access to national and international support and funding, in a crisis of identity. Historians have always been relevant and History will continue to count, where it counts.



48. M. Noor Davids, “‘Making History Compulsory’: Politically Inspired or Pedagogically Justifiable?”, *Yesterday and Today*, 15, 2016, pp 84–102.

49. G. De Martino, “The Economic Crisis and the Crisis in Economics”, in M.A. Starr (ed.), *Consequences of Economic Downturns* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2011), pp 25–54.

50. See their website: *Rethinking Economics*, at <https://www.rethinkeconomics.org> (accessed 5 February 2021).

51. See their website: *Institute for New Economic Thinking*, at <https://www.ineteconomics.org> (accessed 5 February 2021).

Count me in

Johan Fourie

My plea submitted to *Historia* in mid-2019 already looks like preaching to the converted. Later that year, several projects using digital humanities methods were funded by the Mellon Foundation. In 2020, Mellon also supported several digitisation projects: the Adler Museum Bulletin by Wits, the Hansards by UJ, indigenous African sheet music by UP, and the South African black press by CPUT, to name but a few. Historians are finding that the digitisation of African materials makes it easier for students to engage with primary source documentation and do original research.⁵² This push towards digitisation is exciting news. As the Covid-19 lockdown showed us, digitisation is not a luxury but a necessity, for both teaching and research. But we need to look beyond the obvious sources for digitisation. We may find new questions (and new answers) in unconventional sources formerly of little interest to historians.

I want to thank the commentators for their thoughtful reflections. Yes, not everything that counts can be counted, and vice versa. Yes, counting used to be the economic historian's province. But today more of what was previously uncountable can be counted. In my own recent work, counting has illuminated such diverse topics as military technology, slaves' names and voter disenfranchisement.⁵³ The possibilities are endless. The work of an itinerant merchant is never done. There will be new towns to visit and new wares to acquire in the bustling future entrepôt of South African history.



52. J.E. Kelly and O. Badsha, "Teaching South African History in the Digital Age: Collaboration, Pedagogy, and Popularizing History", *History in Africa*, 47, 2020, p 297.

53. J. Fourie, K. Inwood, and M. Mariotti, "Military Technology and Sample Selection Bias", *Social Science History*, 44, 3, 2020, pp 485–500; K. Ekama, J. Fourie, H. Heese and L-C. Martin, "When Cape Slavery Ended: Introducing a New Slave Emancipation Dataset", *Explorations in Economic History*, 2021, 101390; F. Nyika and J. Fourie, "Black Disenfranchisement in the Cape Colony, c. 1887–1909: Challenging the Numbers", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 46, 3, 2020, pp 455–469.

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