

CHOLER: THE FAILURE OF THE CLIOMETRIC SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

Claude Diebolt and Michael Hauptert have kindly contributed a comment on my “Spleen”. They challenge my pessimistic evaluation, asserting that “cliometrics is alive and well”, and “takes both history and economics very seriously”; I accept that challenge, and respond to it here.

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Quant je serai en la bataille grant
Et je ferrai et mil colps et set cenz,
De Durendal verrez l’acer sanglent.

La Chanson de Roland

I love cliometrics, I would not have devoted my life to it did I not; it grieves me, and angers me, to see the discipline go astray, to earn not admiration but contempt.¹ “Spleen” (Fenoaltea 2019) voiced my dismay at three significant failures that lie at our door; on “Spleen” Claude Diebolt and Michael Hauptert have now contributed a comment (Diebolt and Hauptert 2020). That comment I read – largely *reread*, in fact, as broad parts of it had

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¹ Nor would I criticize it, did I not love it: I see my criticism as a service to the discipline, an attempt to improve it. Some have told me I should serve cliometrics better by keeping quiet, by participating, essentially, in a cover-up. I disagree, failed cover-ups are counterproductive; nor have I ever heard of a *successful* cover-up, why, have you?

appeared *verbatim* in Diebolt and Hauptert (2016) and Hauptert (2017), and their audaciously split infinitives are impossible to forget – with pleasure, for they too clearly love cliometrics, that much we have in common. I read it also with profit, for it let me observe the fall of my shot, and retrain my long rifles.

I turn here to evidence that cliometrics takes neither economics nor history seriously, evidence of systemic failure, evidence that calls forth a different but no more pleasant humor.² Diebolt and Hauptert proudly “defend the accomplishments and current robust health of cliometrics”.³ *Tout va très bien*, they say, *Madame la Marquise*; let me start on some *petits riens*.

1. REGIONAL INCOMES

I shall begin by straying from Diebolt and Hauptert’s list of our collective accomplishments, and consider the recent large-scale project on regional economic development in Europe since 1900, a project that involved Joan Rosés, Nikolaus Wolf, and twenty-three further contributors (Rosés and Wolf 2018), a project I believe my taxes supported, along with many other things I would rather they hadn’t. In the event, that work was selected as the topic of the (misnamed) “round table” discussion at the 2019 Modena meetings of the *Associazione per la storia economica*: it was presented there by Niko Wolf (and discussed for balance from the other end of the alphabet, by Roberto Basile and Carlo Ciccarelli).

When I was eventually given the floor I asked Niko to confirm my understanding that they used relative wages as proxies for relative incomes, which he graciously did. I then proceeded to explain, with what I call tough love and others call brutality, that wage ratios are ratios of *marginal* products, while income ratios are ratios of *average* products – and that students who confused the two failed my course in Introductory Economics. Moving from economics to history, I added that the transition from traditional *manufacturing* to modern machine-based industry can be seen as a transition from a high marginal/low average product-of-labor regime to a low marginal/high average product-of-labor regime; and that to assume that

² My anger is tied, methinks, to the fear that we cliometricians of today may be met in Hades by the contemptuous smirks of serious scholars. The overall probability of that is low, but the conditional probability is not, and that suffices to irritate me, as it were, to Hell.

³ That the cliometric school has contributed much valuable work is neither deniable nor particularly relevant. A man may be a brilliant economist, a fine colleague, and much else that is good, but if he proceeds to kill his wife he is *ipso facto* a murderer, and all his positive features and contributions matter not a whit.

the ratio of marginals to averages remained unchanged as modern industry spread across Europe's landscape was an exercise in the absurd.⁴

Niko's reply was that that assumption was "a short cut". I would have called it a dead end, in spatial terms a rather different concept, but his own characterization is revealing: it tells us that the steps of the work they felt they could skip were the verification that their algorithm was properly grounded in economic logic, the verification that they were actually measuring what they wanted to measure.

That large-scale collective effort, *pro tanto* representative of our discipline, is to my eyes neither serious economics nor serious history. Diebolt and Hauptert leave it off their laundry-list of cliometric accomplishments: perhaps, in their heart of hearts, they agree.

2. NUMERACY

On the age-heaping/numeracy literature, in contrast, Diebolt and Hauptert wax lyrical. "Among the newer techniques popularized by cliometricians are age heaping models and the use of church book registries. *Age heaping can be applied to approximate the basic numerical skills* and hence basic education of a population, and its impact on a variety of variables, including the impact of numeracy on long-run growth (Acemoglu, *et al.* 2001, 2002), the role of religion in human capital formation (Becker and Woessmann 2009), basic educational attainment across a wide variety of countries and time periods (Mokyr 1983, Ó Gráda 2006, Budd and Guinane 1991), gender inequalities (De Moor and Van Zanden 2010, Manzel and Baten 2009), and labor market outcomes (Charette and Meng 1998). Tollnek and Baten (2016) provide an exhaustive overview of age-heaping models and their applications". Their key phrase is of course the beginning of their second sentence, the bit I have italicized for emphasis.

My first reaction to that literature was a sharp personal disappointment. I lived in the United States from the early 1960s to the mid-1990s, and, as it happened, rarely wore a watch. When I asked people for the time, there was, I soon noticed, a tremendous amount of heaping: "10:30" and "10:35", say, were frequently reported, the intervening whole minutes almost never.

⁴ Let me add two bits of local color. First, my brutality is *not* new, nor due to age, *teste* my *succès de scandale* at the Santander World Congress, over thirty years ago. Second, the previous year's "round table", in Milan, featured the Maddison project, presented by Jutta Bolt. I was equally unkind to her – I consider research a contact sport, and am an equal-opportunity s.o.b. – and that episode actually triggered my writing of "Spleen". I look forward to our next "round table" with a measure of trepidation.

Had I had the wit to see the significance of that heaping, that it implied a basic lack of numeracy among twentieth-century Americans (in fact the American economists I frequented), I could have started that whole literature myself: it was my best chance to become a famous economist, and I blew it. Damn, damn, damn.

But the focus of my disappointment soon shifted from myself to that entire literature, which so combines bad history, bad economics, and bad logic that next to today's economists and cliometricians the late scholastics appear as empirically-minded scientific geniuses.

Consider first the argument's logic. The age distribution of the population, as reported to the census-takers, shows (clearly fictitious) peaks at ages 5, 10, 15, 20, and so on right up to 100. The inference is that that was due to people who couldn't count, who were somehow unfamiliar with the digits 2-3-4 and again 6-7-8-9. Really? There are peaks at 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, and so on: those people could perfectly well count from one to ten by tens, how could they possibly not have been able to count from one to ten by single units? The leap from the observed heaping to a lack of "basic numerical skills" is simply not logical, it can be made only by – to put it kindly, at the risk of pleonasm – a simple-minded economist.

That simple-minded economist is also a dreadful historian, a prisoner of the simple faith of the uneducated, in our own day the faith in progress (the Whig interpretation of history, to those who can tell fact and faith apart): a faith that defines *us* as history's best and brightest, a faith that sees in any difference from us a sign of *inferiority*, in short a faith that robs the uneducated of the empathy with those that lived before us that distinguishes historians from rank yokels commenting on the past.⁵

The simple-minded economist believes the world we have lost was just like ours, the people in it less capable. I would venture to suggest – oyez, oyez – that they were as numerate as we are, and that, like us, they were no more precise than they needed to be (what time is it, again?); and that they lived in a different world, a world for many still blissfully free of an all-pervasive State that has us declare our birth-date every day and twice on Sunday, that forces our life-cycle, from schooling to retirement, into categories determined by calendar age rather than maturity or vigor, a State that deprived me of my teaching job because I turned 70, a State that may soon forbid us retirees the use of libraries and laptops just to prove that

⁵ One wonders to what extent that obtuse sense of superiority and lack of empathy may be induced by testosterone poisoning, but I do not want to get into *that*. By letting us look down on our forebears our faith in progress serves our deep need for status; and now that we can't look down on other races or the other gender the way we used to, it is more valuable than ever.

they don't retire anybody who is still productive... but I digress. The point here is simply that the only link between heaping and numeracy is the obtuseness of the observer.⁶

And the trilogy can be completed, the simple-minded Whigs who created this literature are not, or at least do not behave as, good economists, for economics itself provides a powerful antidote to simple-minded Whiggery. Whig *historians* could blithely refer to "the Goths and Vandals of open fields", to "thrifless barbarians", but economists' deontology imposes a presumption of rationality, the presumption that if some past behavior looks stupid to *me* it is because *I* am too stupid to understand its logic. That is the starting point of Douglass North's pioneering analyses of the medieval manor and more, the cornerstone of the institutional economics he originated and in which I too have dabbled.

Let me refer the reader back to the cliometric debate on open fields (Fenoaltea 1988). Donald (at the time) McCloskey accepted the (bourgeois) Whig view that enclosure was rent- and output-enhancing progress (I leaned toward the Marxist view that it was essentially a rent-enhancing case of class robbery), and proceeded to ask himself *why* peasants then *rationally* accepted "agricultural inefficiency", the loss of output scattering entailed. The issue here is not whether that particular formulation was more or less felicitous, what matters is that it sprang from the logically prior question, the (good) economist's question: presuming rationality, setting aside the Whigs' contempt for those who lived before us, how are we to understand the logic, the overall efficiency, of an enduring institution we have since abandoned?

A lack of numeracy should puzzle an economist, as the open fields' putative agricultural inefficiency puzzled McCloskey, because of its obvious costs to a peasantry engaged in market exchange and subject to taxes and tithes. An economist owes it to the discipline to ask, and should *naturally* ask, why and how those peasants could *rationally* refrain from investing in numeracy.⁷ That question has methinks no answer, it would force the economist to step back, and reconsider whether a lack of numeracy actu-

⁶ That "numeracy" is a powerful explanatory variable is neither here nor there. Age-heaping is surely correlated with many features tied to development and potential development (especially in our Whiggish frame of reference): it is the facile, obtuse identification of all that with "numeracy" that is wrong, slanderous, and supremely irritating. Where young men were subject to age-based military service, for example, one would expect less heaping in their case than in that of young women.

⁷ Granting, for the sake of argument, that such investment was needed at all. To my mind numeracy is a hard-wired feature of the human brain, on a par not with literacy but with the ability to speak a language: I cannot imagine a hominid so primitive s/he could not track quantities, if only with notches on a stick.

ally existed, whether it is actually established by the observed age-heaping. But the economist's question seems here not have been asked at all: the literature on numeracy is nothing economists can be proud of, for there is no evidence of a contribution by an economist educated in his or her own discipline, an economist worthy of the name.

3. POST-UNIFICATION ITALY

Per Diebolt and Hauptert “any recent issue of *Cliometrica* ... will provide ample evidence that cliometrics is alive and well, [and] takes both history and economics very seriously”: that is their glove-slap to my face.

I accept their challenge; the choice of weapons is mine, I choose the September 2019 issue of *Cliometrica*. Into the lists I enter, as my *campione* (useful Italian word, that, it means both “champion” and “sample”) Emanuele Felice, armed with his article “Rethinking the take-off” (Felice 2019), happily within my area of expertise. Felice is an apt choice, his publication record is the envy of his peer group, he well illustrates what the discipline accepts and rewards; for all that I put him in harm's way reluctantly, for he is a former student of Vera Zamagni's, and I would rather *not* play the old lion that devours other lions' cubs.⁸ But I name him all the same: *quando ce vo' ce vo'*.⁹

Unlike most Italian economic historians, even much senior to him, Felice boasts a *Wikipedia* page, created no doubt by a fervent admirer; it defines him as an Italian historian, economist, and writer.¹⁰ Writer he certainly is, with books on everything from a labor union in Bologna to the economic history of happiness, many scholarly papers, and editorials in major newspapers: using his pen, or keyboard, to achieve notoriety, to serve an ambition that would appear to aim beyond mere scholarship.¹¹

⁸ For that very reason, some years ago, I turned down the invitation to review FELICE (2015); and I have been told, I fear rightly, that I failed to do my duty to the discipline.

⁹ From our oral history: a Roman cardinal of the Roman Church, sufficiently riled, started violently swearing. His thoroughly shocked secretary meekly interjected “But Your Eminence, in your position...”, only to be cut off with “*quando ce vo' ce vo'!*” (when it is necessary/warranted/justified, it is etc.).

¹⁰ https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emanuele_Felice (accessed February 2020: I do not cite the day, but assure the reader I can indeed count up to 29).

¹¹ https://www.unich.it/sites/default/files/ugov_cvfiles/ugov_cvpersona_en_00000000073629.pdf (accessed February 2020). Felice has just now moved into national politics, to a high position in the Partito Democratico (<http://www.rete8.it/cronaca/123-emanuele-felice-responsabile-del-dipartimento-economia-pd/>, accessed February 2020); were he now to abandon cliometrics one field would gain, the other lose.

Beyond scholarship, or perhaps quite bypassing it, for his *Cliometrica* paper quickly suggests that Felice never mastered his subject matter. His introduction includes a review of the interpretations in the literature, a review so badly wrong that it attributes to *me* the very different views of Franco Bonelli and Luciano Cafagna (pp. 406-407); a little further along he states that “the ‘Istat-Vitali series’ ... were considered not up to international standards” (p. 408), where in fact they adhered strictly to the standards of the day (indeed of today), and were criticized because they did and not because they did not. I long taught economic history at the undergraduate level, had Felice penned such nonsense in a blue-book he would have failed the course.¹²

This poor performance is in fact surprising, as he should have been set straight, if by nothing else, by two pieces of mine he duly cites (Fenoaltea 2010, 2011). The first piece is an article he clearly read, at least enough to have described it somewhere as “witty”, though I now suspect he never read beyond the salacious bits. The second is my Cambridge book: he refers only to the primitive airplane on its cover, as if that was all he saw or needed to see, as if he divined the book’s content from its dust-jacket. He may of course be writing in all good faith, morally certain he knows all he needs to know: selling snake-oil but believing in its curative powers, or, to put it another way, believing in the curative powers of what he sells, but selling snake-oil. The observationally equivalent alternative, with even worse implications for our discipline, is that he may instead be gaming the system with malice aforethought, consciously bluffing, counting on the inevitably limited expertise of the journal editor and the predictable incompetence of the referees.

But let us turn to the empirical content of Felice’s *Cliometrica* paper, to the work of the “economist” and “historian”. His reassessment of the size and role of the services is based on the Bologna-school estimates incorporated in Alberto Baffigi’s sesquicentennial series (Baffigi 2011), the estimates described in Battilani-Felice-Zamagni (2014); their revision much increases the 1911 value-added benchmark for the entire sector, and a key component of *that* is their 76-percent increase to Istat’s centennial estimate for “commerce” (from 1,543 million lire all the way to 2,708 million lire).¹³ Istat did not adequately document their figures, and the revised

¹² That he is now himself teaching raises issues of a different order, beyond our present scope.

¹³ The criticisms of the Bologna-school “services” series, and their revision, are documented in Fenoaltea (2017): 13-51; only a telling sample can be touched on here. As it happened, Felice (2019) was first submitted on January 3, 2018; Fenoaltea (2017) was first uploaded December 30, 2017, and clearly blind-sided him. His paper was already written, mine an unex-

estimate of “value added in commerce” was obtained *ex novo* by applying to total marketed consumption in 1911 the commercial markups observed in the 1930s.

Consider first the commercial markups. No serious *economist* would take relative prices from a generation later without considering how market forces may have changed them. Commercial markups reflect the relative cost of commodity production (and transportation) and commodity marketing: since over those decades there was significant productivity growth in production (and transportation), while marketing technology remained quite unchanged, percentage markups were surely lower in 1911 than in the 1930s. Of that Felice appears to have no inkling, the definition of “economist” that may include him cannot be a narrow one.¹⁴ No serious *historian* would take relative prices from a generation later without considering how institutional forces may have changed them, without noting that the Fascist legislation that reduced commercial competition likely raised commercial markups, that for that reason too these were likely lower in 1911 than in the 1930s.

Consider next the application of those margins to total marketed consumption: a procedure that backcasts our own world, our own shopping at the supermarket and the mall. But even the most amateur of historians should know that our world is very new, that until quite recently Italians bought fresh food daily directly from the producing farmers who themselves brought it to the “farmers’ market” (sic), and bought large shares of their durables and semi-durables directly from the producing artisans. The “commerce” sector handled the marketing not of all consumption but only of a restricted part: the Battilani-Felice-Zamagni estimate applies a much overstated markup to a much overstated base, not coincidentally implying a residual return to working capital that itself implies impossibly large inventories and an impossibly low turnover rate. When one corrects their errors the 1911 estimate snaps back practically to Istat’s.¹⁵

pected obstacle he could not overcome; on redrafting he masked it, effectively enough, with smoke, mirrors, obfuscation, and a few convenient fibs.

¹⁴ A fellow once told me “I too am an economist, I play the stock market”. Felice’s thought does not seem to be informed by economics as most of us know it: Felice (2015), for example, attributes balance-of-payments equilibrium to emigrants’ remittances (p. 136), and the early-twentieth-century rise in real wages to Giolitti’s pro-labor policies (pp. 145-146), with no recognition of the market forces that underpinned those results. His uncertain grasp of the scholarly literature again shines through, as when he claims that Gerschenkron approved of Giolitti’s policies (p. 143), or, with a cheek *qui mériterait bien la bastonnade*, that his industrial series and mine were “produced with a similar methodology” (p. 147).

¹⁵ The compilers of the Istat estimates had an institutional advantage, as it was then common practice for Istat’s staff to clock in, and then nip out to do their food shopping at the farmers’ market across the street: they knew who they were buying from.

And much the same applies to the services as a whole. The upward revision of the Istat aggregate is very largely undone by a more careful evaluation: the purported empirical basis of Felice's paper is a fiction produced by bad measurement, the illegitimate offspring of bad economics trysting with bad history.

What matters here is that *Cliometrica* published this paper, following peer review: the referees were as ignorant of the literature as the author is, and didn't care enough about the past to verify the paper's empirical merits. Its publication sheds a tawdry light on the author, the referees, the editor, the journal, in fact the entire cliometric school; and I say this, truly, not in anger but in sorrow.

Diebolt and Hauptert's claim that "cliometrics ... takes both history and economics very seriously" rings hollow; their insistence that cliometrics is not only alive but *well* leaves me wondering whether we are not getting our reports on the patient's health from the cancer cells.

4. THE FAILURE OF THE CLIOMETRIC SCHOOL

Between any number of individual failures and *the* failure of our school there is a gap that must be bridged. It is bridged in part by my selection of authors, among the most successful members of our discipline: some of whom appear not to understand economics at all, to have no sense of what our "rationality" actually entails, others to be competent economists – Niko Wolf surely understands microeconomics as well as any one – who in the work they do all too readily set their competence aside. Our flagship contributions are, or at least include, work that does not seriously apply economics to history, work we cliometric pioneers would have derided as we did the "old" economic history: the discipline has not become what we envisaged, it has failed us, nay, we have failed it, for the discipline is now what we have made it. We conceived Apollo, we have raised Quasimodo: how, where, did we do the child wrong?

My thoughts here bring me back to the transmogrification of economics into a "social science", a development tied to Europe's phased suicide and America's consequent hegemony: *Samuelson, sans Guillaume II et Hitler, est inconceivable*. My sense is that science-aping has changed the discipline by changing the incentives to which we ("rationally") respond, and thus the work we do.

In postwar Italy, as far as I could tell, people published anything and anywhere, nothing rode on the journal or publisher. Informed opinion quickly separated the works of merit from the mountains of rubbish: *scholarly* ambition made you write to be read, to deserve to continue to be read,

in short to aim for *quality*.¹⁶ My early professional world, half a century ago, was of course American, but there too quality counted, we looked down on the “garbage men” with a large number of forgettable publications to their name.

Science-aping changed all that, it gave us the scourge of bibliometric scores, the impious fiction that quality can be measured.¹⁷ With careers, wages, prestige based on bibliometric success, our incentives changed, we now write not to be read but to be *published*, in as “good” a journal as possible.¹⁸ More precisely: not to be read by the profession at large, let alone to contribute to culture, but to be read with(out dis)approval by two or three expert referees, referees that have become all-powerful because the editors, overwhelmed by the volume of submissions, look only to their final recommendation, and adamantly refuse to discuss the merits of their criticisms.¹⁹ Struth, *vita vissuta*: our “scientific” editors base their decisions on authority and refuse to consider logic or evidence, we ape the sciences not as scientists but as apes.

Such “peer review” lets the criticized determine whether criticism can be published, it serves orthodoxy rather than progress, it is the peer review that muzzled Galileo: our “science” is exactly where real science was some four hundred years ago. And so we encourage established scholars, and

¹⁶ Merely *academic* ambition could be served by publication without regard to quality, what really mattered was powerful support, support which could be earned by mere faithful service. Bibliometric scoring was introduced in Italy to reduce the scope for academic favoritism – with mixed results (above, footnote 12).

¹⁷ That is arrant nonsense. Quality, like beauty or smut, is something we readily recognize but cannot quantify; if quality could be captured by a quantitative indicator the Soviet system would never have collapsed, “history proves” (ha!) it cannot be. I do not exclude that in the experimental sciences, say, bibliometric measures may make sense; I do not know, and frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn, it has nothing to do with us.

¹⁸ In as good an *economics* journal as possible, with clear damage to our own discipline, our own journals. I always did what I could to bring the latter to the attention of economists at large, reserving my best work for our own outlets, contributing to *Explorations* a comment on a debate in the *AER*: greater love hath no scholar, etc. More generally, performance inevitably adapts to the criteria that evaluate it: I am as competitive as the next man, were RePEc to evaluate us by the length of our ear-lobes I too would start pulling on mine. But there is still room for idiosyncracies, methinks my time-discount rate is unusually low: I set aside my highly visible and well-rewarded work on institutions to devote myself to measuring production in post-Unification Italy, to “data creation” that entails relative obscurity, but that seemed and seems to me my best chance to leave behind *monumentum aere perennius*.

¹⁹ I must mention here by name the only exception I have recently encountered: Hans-Joachim Voth, alas no longer the editor of a cliometric journal. For the record, my most successful paper (FENOALTEA 1984) never made it past peer review: after nine rejections over five years, when the *JEH* again changed hands I submitted it there for the third time (as one could, before electronic editorial assistants gave journal editors an infinite institutional memory): McCloskey, the new editor, read it and proceeded to publish it.

force our young, to look inward, to be conventional, to produce work as self-referential as that of the late scholastics; to satisfy the academy by producing *art d'académie*, the art accepted and rewarded by the official circles of its day, art which is within a generation rejected as trash.

Our cliometric school has failed, methinks, because it has neglected its ties to the humanities, to culture, to serious scholarship, and, with that, to serious *economics*. It has whored itself to the “scientific” pretensions of its American subculture; and if the strumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?

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