Quantitative Social-Scientific History


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Abstract

Quantitative social science launched its invasion of American history during the years 1957 to 1961. In 1957, Lee Benson, a historian schooled in sociology, published a sweeping critique of "impressionistic" treatments of nineteenth-century American elections and called on historians to expand their definition of primary sources beyond newspapers and manuscripts to include quantifiable data. Four years later Benson added practice to preachment, relying heavily on a quantitative analysis of election returns to produce a brilliant and original interpretation of American politics in the 1830s and '40s. In a paper delivered in 1957, two Harvard economists, Alfred H. Conrad and John R. Meyer, reinvigorated the discussion of an old historical problem and initiated the new "econometric history" by demonstrating the profitability both of slavery and of applying modern economic theory and techniques to history. By 1960, the "climetricians," as they were jibingly labeled, were holding annual conferences at Purdue to coordinate research efforts and criticize each other's papers. A year before, the historian Merle Curti, assisted by several other historians and his psychologist wife, Margaret, published a quantitative historical study of community social structure and mobility, which, along with the work of Stephan Thernstrom, inspired legions of students to take up the "new social history."

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Quantitative History is an approach to historical research that makes use of quantitative, statistical and computer tools. It is considered a branch of "social science history" and has favorite journals, such as "Historical Methods," "Social Science History," the "Journal of Interdisciplinary History," and "Social Evolution & History." Data bases: Social and Political. Quantitative historians start with data bases. Large quantities of economic and demographic data are available in print format. The quantifiers held move these into computeri