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978-0-521-89501-9 — The Cost of Living in America: A Political History of Economic Statistics,
1880–2000
Thomas A. Stapleford
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THE COST OF LIVING IN AMERICA

Since the late nineteenth century, the “cost of living” has been a prominent part of debates about American political economy. By the early twentieth century, that prominence had taken a quantitative turn, as businessmen, unions, economists, and politicians all turned to cost-of-living statistics in their struggle to control and reshape the American economy. Today, the continuing power of these statistics is exemplified by the U.S. Consumer Price Index, whose fluctuations have enormous consequences for economic policy and the federal budget (including the allocation of hundreds of billions of dollars annually through cost-of-living escalator clauses in programs such as Social Security). In this book, Thomas A. Stapleford interweaves economic theory with political history to create a novel account of this quantitative knowledge. Demonstrating that statistical calculations inevitably require political judgments, he reveals what choices were made in constructing and using cost-of-living statistics and why those choices matter, both for our understanding of American history and for contemporary political and economic life.

Thomas A. Stapleford is an assistant professor in the Program of Liberal Studies at the University of Notre Dame, where he also teaches in the Graduate Program in the History and Philosophy of Science. He has published related work in the *Journal of American History*, *Labor History*, and *Labor: Studies in the Working-Class History of the Americas*. Research for this book was supported by the National Science Foundation, the Notre Dame Faculty Research Program, and the Harvard Center for American Political Studies.

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THOMAS A. STAPLEFORD

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CAMBRIDGE
 UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi - 110025, India
 103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

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 It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of
 education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521895019

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First published 2009

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

Stapleford, Thomas A., 1974–

The Cost of Living in America : a political history of economic statistics,
 1880–2000/Thomas A. Stapleford.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 978-0-521-89501-9 (hardback) – ISBN 978-0-521-71924-7 (pbk.)

1. Cost and standard of living–United States–History. I. Title.

HD6983.S664 2009

339.4'209730904–dc22 2009022050

ISBN 978-0-521-89501-9 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-71924-7 Paperback

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To Cathy, who made this book possible

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Here in this group we are colleagues who can speak with candor. Let us therefore candidly recognize that statistical truths, like the other truths about man's social life, are created rather than discovered.... [W]hen it comes to unemployment or poverty or price inflation or mental disease, we are dealing with social phenomena. It is man who invents and defines these categories. It is man who selects a few dimensions which are capable of measurement and uses them to characterize complex social conditions and relationships. It is man who decides how much effort should be expended in measuring these dimensions or others which might be selected.¹

– Arthur M. Ross, Commissioner of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics,
Speech before the Washington Statistical Society, January 1966

¹ Published in Arthur M. Ross, "Living with Symbols," *The American Statistician*, vol. 20, no. 3 (1966): 16.

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Acknowledgments

Over the many years that I have worked on this project, I have accumulated an enormous debt to colleagues, friends, and family. As a graduate student in the history of science at Harvard University, I benefited from the unwavering support and guidance of Anne Harrington, who remains a model teacher and scholar for me. Peter Buck provided both incisive criticism and regular encouragement, and his good-humored skepticism has improved my work immensely. Lizabeth Cohen generously reached across department lines to serve on my committee, and I gained valuable insights into historical analysis and the writing process through her dissertation working group. The graduate students in the Department of the History of Science were an amazing group; I am fortunate to have them as colleagues and friends.

I am grateful to everyone who read all or part of the manuscript and shared their comments, criticisms, and suggestions. Margo Anderson and Spencer Banzhaf gave me extensive comments on every aspect of the book and greatly improved the final version. Peter Buck heroically served double-duty, not only slogging through the dissertation multiple times but returning to read the penultimate manuscript and, as usual, providing crucial advice. My four anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press helped me to think through the larger structure of the book, key components of my arguments, and even the details of my prose. Many others critiqued chapters or large sections at various stages, including Franklin Fisher, Bernd Goehring, Claudia Goldin, Michael Gordin, Meg Jacobs, Eric Kupferberg, Liz Lee, Kevin Mongrain, Jessica Murdoch, Pierpaolo Polzonetti, Pat Spacks, Matt Stanley, and Jack Triplett. Through conversations and correspondence, an even larger number of colleagues have shaped my perspective, helped me to refine my ideas, and shared their own expertise, including Alain Desrosières, Emmanuel Didier, Mary Furner, Phil Mirowski, Mary Morgan,

Sharrona Pearl, Ted Porter, Marshall Reinsdorf, Grace Shen, and Rob Van Horn. At Cambridge University Press, I am grateful for the diligent work of the editorial staff, and especially for Scott Parris's constant enthusiasm and commitment to the project.

Faculty and students in the Program of Liberal Studies at the University of Notre Dame have made South Bend an exciting and stimulating place to work, while the Dean's office and the Office of Research have provided generous financial support for research travel and leave time. Throughout my research and writing, I have been supported by a variety of fellowships and grants, including a grant from the National Science Foundation (no. 0522433), a Packard Dissertation Completion Fellowship, a dissertation fellowship from the Harvard Center for American Political Studies, a summer research grant from the Charles Warren Center, and a research grant from the Faculty Research Program at the University of Notre Dame. While revising the final manuscript, I had the pleasure of being a Visiting Scholar at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, which gave me the time and resources to complete the project.

Equally valuable was the extensive help I received from archival staff across the country. Without the aid of numerous archivists at the National Archives, I would have never been able to locate the necessary records within the largely unprocessed collection of the Bureau of Labor Statistics. At the George Meany Memorial Archives, Bob Reynolds shared his extensive insight into the history of the AFL research department and its manuscript collections. Judson MacLaury and Linda Stinson at the Historical Office in the U.S. Department of Labor helped me to find and use their rich oral history collections. Staff at Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library, the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University, the Wisconsin Historical Society, the Special Collections Research Center at George Washington University, and the Special Collections Library at Penn State University all helped to make my research enjoyable and hassle-free. Closer to home, Erik Peterson spent numerous hours compiling valuable data from the early history of the U.S. cost-of-living index.

I have been blessed with a wonderful group of family and friends who are too numerous to thank individually. I'm especially grateful to my immediate family, whose care and company have carried me through. Dick and Judy Boeckstedt have given me love and support for nearly two decades. My parents, John and Linda, encouraged my intellectual pursuits throughout my life, but more importantly, they have been shining examples of love and service. Any of the character strengths that I have are due to their

Acknowledgments

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inspiration. My sister Liza's humor and joyful spirit have entertained me since we were young; I've been lucky to have her as a sibling.

I can never fully express my debt and gratitude to my wife, Cathy, who made this project possible. She dealt with long hours, listened patiently as I worked through problems, arranged vacations around archival trips, and provided a much-needed voice of good sense, wisdom, and support. Most of all, she has been a wonderful mother to our two children, Jane and Will. The love and laughter that the three of them share with me brighten my days and remind me of what matters most in my life. And yes, Jane, Daddy's book is finally done.

Abbreviations

ORGANIZATIONS AND TITLES

AARP	American Association of Retired Persons
ACSL	Advisory Committee to the Secretary of Labor
ACW	Amalgamated Clothing Workers
AFDC	Aid to Families with Dependent Children
AFL	American Federation of Labor
ASA	American Statistical Association
BAE	U.S. Bureau of Agricultural Economics
BHE	U.S. Bureau of Home Economics
BLS	U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
BRAC	Business Research Advisory Council
CEA	U.S. Council of Economic Advisers
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
CIR	U.S. Committee on Industrial Relations
COGSIS	Committee on Government Statistics and Information Services
COLA	cost-of-living adjustment
CPI	U.S. Consumer Price Index
CRIW	Conference on Research in Income and Wealth
EFC	Emergency Fleet Corporation
FESAC	Federal Statistics Advisory Committee
GM	General Motors
GNP	Gross National Product
JEC	U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee
LRAC	Labor Research Advisory Council
NBER	National Bureau of Economic Research
NCF	National Civic Federation

NCL	National Consumer League
NICB	National Industrial Conference Board
NRC	National Resources Committee
NWLB	National War Labor Board
OEO	U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity
OPA	U.S. Office of Price Administration
OAA	Old-Age Assistance
OASDI	Old-Age, Survivors', and Disability Insurance
OASI	Old-Age and Survivors' Insurance
SLAB	Shipbuilding Labor Adjustment Board
UAW	United Auto Workers
UE	United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers
USWA	United Steelworkers of America

PERIODICAL LITERATURE AND BOOK SERIES

AER	<i>American Economic Review</i>
BLS Bulletin	Bulletin of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
HOPE	<i>History of Political Economy</i>
ILR	<i>International Labour Review</i>
JAH	<i>Journal of American History</i>
JASA	<i>Journal of the American Statistical Association</i>
JPE	<i>Journal of Political Economy</i>
MLR	<i>Monthly Labor Review</i>
NABL	Proceedings of the annual convention of officials from state bureaus of labor statistics. The titles of both the organization and its proceedings changed several times; in the notes, the latter is abbreviated as <i>NABL</i> (the most common later title being "National Association of Officials of Bureaus of Labor Statistics").
NYT	<i>New York Times</i>
PASA	<i>Publications of the American Statistical Association</i>
QJE	<i>Quarterly Journal of Economics</i>
SIW	Studies in Income and Wealth

ABBREVIATED ARCHIVES AND LIBRARIES

FDR Library	Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York
NARA	U.S. National Archives II, College Park, Maryland

Abbreviations

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RBML	Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, New York
WRL	Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan
WSHS	Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin

ABBREVIATED MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS (INDENTED ABBREVIATIONS ARE SERIES TITLES FROM WITHIN AN ARCHIVAL COLLECTION)

BLS	Bureau of Labor Statistics, RG 257, NARA
ACF 1941–62	Records of the Commissioner of Labor Statistics, Advisory Committee Files, 1941–62
GCS 1934–50	General Correspondence and Subject File, 1934–1950
GCS 1946–72	General Correspondence and Subject File, 1936–1972
LRAC	Records of the Labor Research Advisory Council
PFAC	Program Files of the Office of the Associate Commissioner, Office of Prices and Living Conditions, 1946–1979
RCL-PPF 1950–1975	Records of the Commissioner of Labor Statistics, Program and Policy Files, 1950–1975
Wickens correspondence	Correspondence of Deputy Commissioner Aryness J. Wickens, 1939–1950
DOL	Department of Labor, RG 174, NARA
Ida Merriam papers	Papers of Ida Merriam, George Washington University, Washington, D.C.
Lubin papers	Papers of Isador Lubin, FDR Library
NRPB	National Resources Planning Board, RG 187, NARA
NWLB	National War Labor Board, RG 2, NARA
OHC-CU	Oral History Collection, RBML
OMB	Office of Management and the Budget, RG 51, NARA

CSB-ACSL	Central Statistical Board, Records of Cooperating Agencies, Advisory Committee to the Secretary of Labor
CSB-General Records SR 1940–68	Central Statistical Board, General Records Statistical Records Relating to Particular Subject Areas, 1940–1968
Perkins papers	Papers of Frances Perkins, RBML
Stewart papers	Papers of Ethelbert Stewart, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
U.S. Shipping Board	U.S. Shipping Board, RG 32, NARA