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An Inaugural Lecture  
M. M. Postan  
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## THE HISTORICAL METHOD IN SOCIAL SCIENCE

Few other branches of university study are more indigenous to Cambridge than the one which I have the great honour to represent. It was in Cambridge that Archdeacon Cunningham laid the foundations of economic history as a university subject, and it was out of this University that the long stream of his pioneer books issued. Cunningham was a great missionary, for economic history was to him part of his political and philosophical faith. He believed that English thought, and English politics of his time, wanted rescuing from the a-moral and a-national prejudices of liberal economics and whig history; and it was from economic history as then taught in Germany that the cure would come. This belief led him to concentrate very largely on the problems of economic policy to the

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exclusion of many of the topics which form the scope of economic history now. Yet it is remarkable how, in spite of his preoccupations, the work has survived the faith which prompted it and in its main outlines endures to our own day. If economic historians of the next generation were able to devote themselves to specialized study, it was because the field was occupied for them and the foundation laid by Cunningham.

But what the generation which followed owed to the man who laid the foundation, the present generation owes to the man who built on them: the first holder of the Chair, the master mason who has preceded me. On the ground on which Dr Clapham has worked and still works he found a mass of half-knowledge, overgrown with picturesque and stubborn weeds. This ground he has not only cleared, but in his own inimitable, lapidary way, has covered with a structure of facts as hard and certain as granite. On his ground and in his manner nothing else remains to be done: so in

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Cambridge where the first phase of economic history was begun, the second has just been concluded.

## I

With these achievements to precede him, no present holder of the Chair can claim to be a pioneer. He will never know the joy of staking out the first claims and of turning the first sod, or the greatest of all joys, that of inventing new names. Yet he will be a hypocrite if he pretends not to relish the advantages of his position as an inheritor; above all, the great advantage of being able not to engage in his inaugural lecture in the great controversy of history as science *versus* history as art.

In so far as science means accuracy, and art good writing, their respective claims on historians have now been settled, for we all now agree with the Regius Professor that history should be both accurate and readable. But even if both science and art are defined by their objects—science as a search

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for general causes, art as an exercise in imaginative creation—the issue does not present itself to economic history, though it may still concern other branches of history. For in economic history the practices of its founders, the accident of its rise and the nature of its material, deprive the historian of real choice and condemn him to dwell with the social sciences.

The facts of economic history cannot be shaped, as a personal biography or a field of battle can, into an image with a direct appeal to our artistic sensibilities. Its most effective instrument, as Dr Clapham has so well argued and proved, is the impersonal language of statistical measurements. It came into existence not as an attempt to rival the novel or the drama in the recreation of life, but as an endeavour to assist in the solution of social problems. Its founders abroad were lawyer-sociologists of the romantic period, Möser, Guizot, Lamprecht, or the economists of the mid-century, Knies, Roscher, List. Its source

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of inspiration in this country is Adam Smith, and its ethos derives more from Bacon than from Shakespeare. So, much as economic historians would like to rank with the richest and oldest of the arts, they are compelled to serve the poorest and the youngest of sciences.

But for one controversy they have escaped they have raised legions of others. Having gone to dwell with the social sciences they have still to decide the details of the dwelling: what it is to be—detached or semi-detached, and where—in the public halls or the servants' quarters. All these are problems of cohabitation within the social sciences, and the very fact that the sites have not yet been completely marked out makes the choice uncertain and difficult.

Regarded superficially, the mood now prevailing among history's nearest neighbours is very propitious to economic and social history. A new wave of empiricism appears to be sweeping across regions hitherto inhabited by pure theory. The

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most general, and the least defined of social studies, sociology, is rapidly winding up its interest in comprehensive formulae and is turning into a comparative study of institutions: family, property, legal custom, class division. When done expertly, it merges into the specialized study of social evidence; and since all social evidence, where it is not anthropological or statistical, is bound to be historical, much of sociology has been assuming the character of generalized and universalized history. Similarly, what now passes for political science is in large part concerned with political institutions as they are revealed in recent historical experience. And finally, economics—the field in which economic historians most frequently camp—has entered into one of its empirical phases.

The economists, like the theoretical sociologists of old, only more so, tried to solve the largest possible problems from the least possible knowledge. The ingenuity which went, and still goes, into some of the syllo-

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gistic exercises of theoretical economics is only rivalled by the unreality of some of its conclusions. But if some of its conclusions are capable of illuminating real problems of economic life, and economics as a whole is something more than a soufflé of whipped postulates, it is because even the most theoretical of economists sometimes manage to mix their theorems with a little social observation. The fact that the Cambridge economists, from Marshall to Keynes, have always tried to draw upon their personal observations of reality may account for the practical importance of their theoretical constructions. Marshall's capacity for interpolating a new empirical condition at each successive stage of his argument, and of calling in new facts to redress old conclusions, is perhaps the most striking feature of his method. And no reader of Keynes's general theory will fail to observe the central position occupied in it by two acutely observed empirical scales.

But what in books of Marshall or Keynes

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is an occasional spark of private wisdom now promises, or shall I say threatens, to become an organized branch of economic study. The realization that their subject has been purer than it ought to be has led the economists to insist upon the need for inductive study. In this country very recently, in the United States and Germany for quite a long time, an ever-growing amount of academic effort has been turned to the collection of economic facts. Studies of individual industries, of individual firms, of price and wage movements, commercial treaties and legislative methods, have been flooding the market. Measured by bulk, most American economic study is devoted to collection of facts. Similarly measured, the syllabus of the Economics Tripos in Cambridge consists very largely of courses on this or that industry, this or that region. And to listen to fashionable economic talk, one might think that the whole race of economists has become converted to the religion of the counting machine.



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## II

So, superficially, it would appear that history, as the repository of the empirical facts which the economist and sociologist can employ, has come to its own again, and that the social sciences are once again becoming historical. And yet, if truth be known, much of the recent hankering for facts and wooing of facts and amassing of facts, appears to an economic historian as far removed from history and as irrelevant to the real business of empirical study as are the arm-chair fantasies of the sociologists or the pure abstractions of the mathematical economists. For though in a sense all facts are historical facts, and all historical facts are social evidence, the data which the economists and sociologists now accumulate are seldom employed in a way which an economic historian would recognize as historical.

History is something which is both more and less than what sociologists and econo-

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mists now make of it. It is certainly something more than an assemblage of data. We all know that what now distinguishes the honourable occupation of antiquaries from the questionable occupation of historians is that whereas antiquaries collect facts historians study problems. To a true antiquary all past facts are welcome, to an historian facts are of little value unless they are causes, or parts of causes, or the causes of causes, of the phenomena which he studies. A description of an industry wherein all the facts which strike the student's eye are assembled is a piece of economic antiquarianism. Economic history ends at the point at which the facts cease to answer questions, and the nearer the questions are to social problems and the more completely the problems dominate the search for facts, the nearer is the study to the true function of history in social science.

These obvious remarks may strike economists as an admonition delivered at a wrong address, for in the past the econo-