We can put away the pitchforks and torches; David J. Staley is not a history heretic trying to convert us to cliometricians. This book, an address to his fellow historians, proposes a reexamination of visual methodologies. As Staley notes on several occasions, he sees the computer more like the telescope than the printing press, an instrument of visual inquiry more than a word processor. Staley is careful to be clear that he is not saying that visual history is better. It is simply another tool that historians can put into their repertoire. He calls on historians not to let past mistakes of particular historians prejudice us against useful visual and quantitative methods. However, he also gently tells digital historians not to fall into the same hubris as the cliometricians. Prose has been the medium of historians for 2,400 years, and history begins with the invention of the written word. Computers may add dynamite to our tools next to our mining picks, but that does not mean blowing things up is always appropriate, or that we should start throwing the dynamite at each other … again.

When Staley uses the term “visualization,” he is not talking about the pretty pictures that we use to decorate a text or that our students use to try to take up some of the space on their term papers. He is using a definition akin to that used in science. A visualization is a method of efficiently displaying large amounts of information. A map is the most familiar type of visualization to historians. How long would it take to convey all the information of a map in prose? You would need to explain not only a list of countries and cities but also which bordered which; the shape of those borders; the direction, distance, and angle of each to every other country or city; and the kind of terrain that was between them. We use a map to convey spatial information, but there are many other types of visualizations that could be useful to historians.

While Staley is not hostile to traditional history practices like the cliometricians were and does not view visualizations as superior, he does argue persuasively that visualizations have their strengths, are best suited for certain tasks, and can be usefully applied as cognitive tools in areas in which we would not usually consider using visualizations. Most of this book is focused on practical applications of visualizations that can effectively communicate large amounts of information, and do it more effectively than pure prose could do. He also touches on some larger ideas about the future of visualizations that, while interesting, go far beyond the scope of their applications to history. There are a variety of visualizations discussed in the book, from word clouds to virtual reality, from side-by-side screens showing how life under Tokugawa Japan differed from Meiji to Geographic Information Systems (GIS). Some visualizations, like GIS, are capable of being more information rich and academically rigorous than others.

Staley challenges us as historians to reevaluate how we use some of the technology of the past century. The reasoning behind Staley’s cautious approach and other scholars’ reticence to engage in quantitative and digital history may not make sense to younger historians, because graduate students and early career historians may not realize that they are maneuvering around the fallout of an old fight. When computers first began to be used as tools in academia, a number of historians began to utilize them. But in the seventies, a group emerged, collectively known as the cliometricians, spearheaded by
Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, that almost single-handedly managed to set history back by about a century. This was not because they used economical models or utilized databases that had been computerized. They arrogantly claimed to have rendered obsolete all the proceeding millennia of history, going back to Herodotus. The field of history was unimpressed. Though the math behind their ideas had been rigorously formulated by preceding economists, the primary sources were not appropriate for those tools, and their evidence was far too thin to make any reasonable conclusions, let alone the radical rewriting of American history they intended. Anyone acquainted with the quantitative methods they attempted to utilize found their data inadequate and their conclusions jaw-droppingly unfounded.

The attempted coup failed miserably, but not before a few fist fights broke out at major history conferences. Since this fiasco, historians have been wary of attempts to change or add to how we conduct our research. This goes beyond a regard for traditions, or any idea that “if it was good enough for Herodotus, it is good enough for me.” The vast majority of historical evidence is in written form. The development of writing is when history begins, and material history is the traditional domain of anthropologists, archaeologists, and even art historians. How better can we discuss written documents than in the same medium? Because of this, a book like Staley’s cannot just be about new tools for historians. These proposed changes always harken back to the cliometricians, and effort must be taken to distinguish these ideas from them, lest they be painted with the same brush as the cliometricians.

Now a new generation of historians is coming up. They, including me, grew up with personal computers. Our first encounter with American history was probably playing the educational video game Oregon Trail in elementary school. Using digital sources in our endeavors comes naturally to us, and this has been giving rise over the past twenty years to what is being called “digital history.” Again we are realizing the utility of these new methods, and many historians are making great contributions using digital history. History as a discipline finds its own subject repeating itself. We are in a similar position to the late sixties, before Fogel and Engerman declared war with *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Slavery* (1974). The problem was never with the tools that Fogel and Engerman used, it was their superior attitude and disregard for highly developed methodologies. Digital and visual history, like cliometrics, will never replace prose and the methods that have been used for the past twenty-four centuries. But we can add new tools to our repertoire. More important than whether we use these new tools is how we treat our fellow historians. We can respect those who use different methods to examine our history, and be the stronger for it.

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