

Misusing History: A Minisymposium

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A couple of years ago the editor and associate editors of *HOPE* attempted to construct an unusual collection of essays by historians of economics. The plan was that the collection would demonstrate to economists that their avoiding history had some significant opportunity cost, and their own projects could be advanced by a fuller historical understanding. Put another way, we sought to show mainstream economists that material developed by historians of economics had current “mainstream” relevance. The project, however, foundered when we were unable to gather enough essays that did such work—most historians appeared more comfortable writing for other historians, and seemed in fact not very connected to the kinds of concerns that engaged “frontline scholars” doing “mainstream economic research.” Despite the traditional rhetorical riffs and flourishes heard in meetings of our subdisciplinary societies, historians did not, it emerged, seem to have much to contribute in a positive way to lively intellectual debates in, say, financial econometrics, public finance, labor economics, or auction theory.

Since we *HOPE* editors did not succeed in placing such a positive carrot in front of “regular” economists to seek their increased connection to the history of political economy, I wondered whether a stick might be more effective. Perhaps frontline economists might be embarrassed by their lack of understanding of history were they shown quite directly how their own quasi-historical arguments looked quite silly to historians more seriously engaged with such matters. After all, no one likes to be thought of as foolish.

I thus asked a number of prominent historians of economics for their favorite example of how a modern economist, mainstream or heterodox, has constructed a spurious past, one known to be inconsistent with the historical evidence. I sought examples of the way mainstream economists often feel that the evidentiary standards for their making historical claims are far lower than the standards for accepting or rejecting an empirical argument. I also sought examples of the perceived lack of any need by many mainstream economists to read secondary writings on, for example, Adam Smith before finding in Smith support for their own position on, say, public education.

The results are now in, and this minisymposium might present a *prima facie* case for reemphasizing the importance of a role for the history of economics in the economics curriculum.