
Introduction: The Quest for Interdisciplinary History

As the fiftieth anniversary of *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* approaches, the editors are happy to welcome to our pages two scholars who have been stalwarts of the journal for many years, Herbert Klein and Jan de Vries. Unbeknownst to each other, they have been pondering the patterns of change in the enterprise to which the *JIH* is committed. Both have been, for many years, leading exponents of the interaction between economics and history; now, however, they have cast their nets more widely, to embrace a broad range of the social sciences.

Although Klein and de Vries do not cover the same ground, both lament the erosion of the alliance between historians and social scientists that has taken place in recent decades. For Klein, the main reason for this change has been historians' "turn" from the insights of the social sciences; for de Vries, it is the effects of the attempt by many historians to restore "narrative history." Whatever the cause, neither scholar is optimistic about closing the gap between historians and social scientists, and the observations of Klein and de Vries should be of some concern to readers of the *JIH*.

Additional forms of interdisciplinary history have come to the fore, but the partnership between history and the social sciences, which seemed to hold so much promise a few decades ago—as Klein and de Vries emphasize—remains central to the enterprise that this journal has encouraged. To the extent that the connection is indeed fraying, one needs to confront analyses and expressions of concern like the ones that are published in this issue.

In presenting the thoughtful assessments by Klein and de Vries, we continue an emphasis that was most evident in a conference sponsored by this journal, which produced a special issue in two parts (Volume XII [1981], 1–374) and a book, both with the title *The New History: The 1980s and Beyond*.¹ The eighteen distinguished colleagues who contributed to the volume explored

1 Theodore K. Rabb and Robert I. Rotberg (eds.), *The New History: The 1980s and Beyond* (Princeton, 2017; orig. pub. 1983).

the historian's need for more numerical and formal analyses, for more attention to psychoanalytic evidence, for the use of improved economic and econometric methods, for an embrace of demographic insights, for the absorption of anthropological knowledge, and for the appropriation of findings from the hard sciences—all to be systematically applied to the understanding of the past. Their contributions looked forward to an era that—as Klein and de Vries suggest—might now be behind us, though, these new strictures draw attention to a shift in emphasis that may produce even wider syntheses. As our conclusion in *The New History* put it, even as disciplinary coherence expands, “History will remain a united endeavor.”

Regardless of the outcome, we believe it important for the *JIH* to pay regular attention to the way that interdisciplinary history is practiced. For that reason, we are honored to present the views of such senior, long-term observers of historical scholarship as Klein and de Vries.

—The Editors