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Interdisciplinary History

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Interdisciplinary

History The inspiration for *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* was a series of articles in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1966 discussing “New Ways in History.” One clear lesson emerged from the various contributions, even though they covered a range that stretched from computers to the visual arts: the most rewarding stimulus to historical scholarship since World War II has been supplied by advances in other disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences. Whole new fields, such as historical demography, and entirely new techniques, such as computer data processing, have appeared and have made a broad impact on many areas of research.

It would be presumptuous to claim that the best works of history written in these twenty-five years have adopted an interdisciplinary approach—though one could mention a number of such studies, most notably the publications of the VI^e Section in Paris, which have already become minor classics. What can be asserted is that this kind of cross-fertilization has enriched our understanding of the processes of the past more than any other single influence of the last few decades. Historians have begun to raise questions previously unasked, and to undertake research that once was thought impossible. Scholarly discussions of differences in marriage age among various social classes in the seventeenth century, the authorship of the Federalist Papers, or the personality of Luther have been given a breadth, a sharpness, and a level of methodological sophistication that would have been inconceivable if traditional research techniques had not been enhanced.

The result has been a growth in opportunity. A multitude of means are now at the historian’s disposal as he seeks better answers to old questions (using, for example, the many powerful tools devised by statisticians in the last few years) and starts new kinds of inquiry. Increasingly he is writing in order to advance solutions to problems, and not merely to relate the nature of such evidence as he may have uncovered. Despite the barriers between disciplines, historians have been reaching out and discovering that colleagues of other scholarly inclinations possess insights that are relevant to their own concerns. The effort is not easy—there is much to learn, and contacts are still hesitant and tentative—but it is providing some of the most original contributions of current historical research. It is this interchange that makes the profession so different in the 1970s from what it was in the 1930s. Many of the most influential related areas (notably economics, sociology, the

history of science, linguistics, data processing, psychology, and statistics) have themselves been totally transformed in the last few decades.

Although these developments have been under way for a number of years, they still remain unfamiliar to a large proportion of historians. This is due partly to a lack of sympathy, partly to the realization that new skills will sometimes be required. But the chief reason appears to be a simple lack of easily available information. The results of interdisciplinary research are published all too often in journals that historians normally do not read. Only recently, an article describing a computer-assisted investigation of English local history in the early modern period was published in *Science*. Similar examples, of papers with major historical concerns appearing in psychology, political science, and other journals not usually seen by historians, could be multiplied at length.

It is true that some vehicles for this work do exist. In the United States, occasional representatives of the genre can be found in *The American Historical Review*, and certain kinds of interdisciplinary research are patronized by *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, *History and Theory*, and *The Journal of Social History*. But each of these publications has numerous other interests, and encourages only a few particular areas of interdisciplinary activity. Elsewhere, *Annales* and *Past & Present* provide excellent fora for articles of this kind, and have in fact published some of the most important recent contributions. And yet they, too, have many other interests with equal claims on their space. If this rapidly growing type of research is to have adequate outlets for the historian, and the historically minded political scientist, economist, sociologist, etc., a journal devoted completely to interdisciplinary history is needed. That is the role which we hope to play.

We will be catholic both conceptually and geographically. We are interested in publishing articles influenced by or emphasizing the techniques of other fields, whether they be anthropology, philology, paleopathology, psychoanalysis, zoology, art criticism, or numismatics. We want to encourage historians to look elsewhere for assistance in solving their problems, and we will publish not only the results of such research, but also descriptions of the methods employed. There will be room for both a psychological study of Calvin Coolidge and an account of various psychological theories which the historian might find useful. The mixture of substantive, historiographical, and methodological articles will be evident in our first few issues. Our book reviews, too,

will emphasize methodology. They will be few in number, but longer than is customary in scholarly journals, so that the broader implications of a subject or a scholar's approach can be explored. One way we will promote our ends will be by seeking reviewers who are ostensibly in fields different from those of the authors: an anthropologist, for instance, on a book about social organization written by a historian, or a historian on a book by a literary critic on Charles Dickens.

These, then, are our hopes and intentions—our justifications for existence. Yet we are also aware of the many problems that may disturb our own development. We will guard against faddishness, the all-too-easy appropriation of inappropriate techniques merely because they arouse current interest; the confusion of technical mastery with the effective use of such mastery; the use of complex ideas and techniques in an elementary fashion; the *hubris* of those engaged in new procedures who forget that they stand on the shoulders of their predecessors; the temptations of jargon; and the tired imitation of genuinely original works.

Erasmus, that expert on folly, provides us with one of the best cautionary passages for our new enterprise. The great Dutchman was himself a supreme example of the interdisciplinary scholar—philologist, classicist, theologian, philosopher, historian, and humorist all in one. As Folly reminds us:

They are the wiser that put out other men's works for their own, and transfer that glory which others with great pains have obtained to themselves; relying on this, that they conceive, though it should so happen that their theft be never so plainly detected, that yet they should enjoy the pleasure of it for the present. And 'tis worth one's while to consider how they please themselves when they are applauded by the common people, pointed at in a crowd, "this is that excellent person"; lie on booksellers' stalls; and in the top of every page have three hard words read, but chiefly exotic and next degree to conjuring.

Praise of Folly (1511)