

4-1-2015

Understanding History on Its Own Terms

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Yong Volz's essay on the limitations of citation data, in the winter issue of *Clio*, struck a chord with me. As provost of Marquette University for five years, I watched as departments across the university began including more citation and impact factor data in promotion and tenure dossiers. While our preparation guidelines recommended citation data and journal rankings as desirable and helpful forms of evidence, I also insisted on putting such data in context when making my own decisions. Fortunately, our university's faculty review committee handled such data with prudence and care, and without the rancor Volz describes. When the citation data told a compelling positive story—well, that was helpful. When it did not, we all just kept talking about the other forms of evidence.

Volz quite rightly worries about the cultural and intellectual prejudices built into any measure that describes itself as impartial, objective, and universally applicable. Historical research takes shape at a different pace and follows different paths than scientific or engineering research does. And, as she convincingly argues, scholars pursuing less widely recognized topics may well suffer disproportionately from standardized comparisons applied indiscriminately across all the university's disciplines. I have always found it awkward to compare the work that goes into an historical article to the work that goes into a scientific report. Many lab assistant hours are required to produce the data for any

scientific report, but, once gathered, that data can be assembled relatively quickly (and may yield several articles). Historical research is more time-consuming and cumbersome. It requires vast amounts of labor, and a significantly longer time to analyze and write up the results—often to produce a single article. It would be good if our citation discussion recognized these sorts of cultural nuances.

One of my concerns is that we never talk very carefully about what it means to cite or to be cited. The scholarly act of citing seems socially rich and contradictory to me, and like any cultural activity it resists simple explanation. When we cite, are we signaling to others that we are knowledgeable about the current state of the field? Taking responsibility for curating the discipline on behalf of others? Paying homage to research that has influenced our own work? Hitching our own star to a better-known scholar's findings? Rewriting the terms of public memory? Styling ourselves as hip, politically astute, morally committed, or wise? Citation is a social performance for both the writer and reader, and as such it demands interpretation.

My biggest concern, however, is that when we too easily accept citation data as dispositive of intellectual quality, we abdicate our professional responsibilities. To a remarkable degree, our scholarly enterprise depend upon judgment, experience, maturity, and argument. When we try to accelerate the evaluation process by equating quality with count, placement, or impact factors, we misunderstand the nature of our quest. When we rely upon

objective measures whose value is assumed to be self-evident, we offshore our intellectual and ethical responsibilities. The life we have chosen requires us to make distinctions and defend them to our peers. That is an intellectually demanding and interpersonally difficult task, and (not surprisingly) we sometimes seek to avoid or simplify it. The accelerated pace at which we all now work also serves us badly. A sense of hurry has even begun to creep into the tenure review letters we write on one another's behalf. Too many harried evaluators now settle for counting the number of publications, noting the impact factors of the venues in which the candidate's work has been published, and assuming that the citation evidence will speak for itself. It has become more difficult (or so it seems to me) to find reviewers willing to engage deeply with a candidate's research, rather than just enumerate it.

If historians hope to resist unreasonable institutional demands for citation evidence, they need to articulate and defend their own vision of academic life, as Volz has. Historians understand that human judgments always rely upon humanly constructed criteria, that the discourse of a society (or an academic discipline) takes shape slowly over time, and that deciding what matters most to us (as scholars or as human beings) is no simple matter.

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