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***THE CENTENNIAL ISSUE OF THE DISCUSSION PAPERS  
IN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL HISTORY***

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# **THE CENTENNIAL ISSUE OF THE DISCUSSION PAPERS IN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL HISTORY**

**Lise Arena, Nicholas Dimsdale, Rui Esteves,  
John Landers, Timothy Leunig, Avner Offer,  
Richard Smith, Hans-Joachim Voth**

## **Abstract**

On the occasion of the hundredth issue of the *Discussion Papers*, this special number contains reflections on the past and future of economic and social history at Oxford and in general. Five scholars, who have been associated with the subject at Oxford, contribute with personal reflections on this topic. Two introductory studies survey the record of the *Discussion Papers* and the history of the discipline at Oxford, focussing on the organisation of the teaching at the undergraduate and graduate levels and on the research lineages initiated by the faculty in post since the war.

## **On the Centennial Issue of the Discussion Papers in Economic and Social History**

Editorial remarks by Rui Esteves

In May 2012, the Discussion Papers in Economic and Social History reached their nineteen-ninth issue. The Oxford economic and social history group decided to take the opportunity of the crossing of this threshold to organise a special centennial issue by inviting reflections on the history and future of the discipline at Oxford and in general. For this purpose we asked a number of scholars who had been associated with the subject at Oxford to answer questions about their personal career in economic and social history, as well as their views on its standing between economics and history. Five respondents contributed generously with texts which we reproduce integrally in this issue. Three of them were involved in teaching the subject in Oxford—John Landers, Avner Offer, and Richard Davis—, whilst Tim Leunig and Hans-Joachim Voth are among the most distinguished alumni of the graduate programme in economic and social history. To help with the consistency of their reflections we provided the contributors with a standardised questionnaire, to which some preferred to answer directly, whilst others composed a text inspired in the questions prepared by us.

Nicholas Dimsdale and Lise Arena also contributed with a set of introductory remarks on the history of the discipline at Oxford, focussing on the organisation of the teaching at the undergraduate and graduate levels and on the research lineages initiated by the faculty in post (especially the Chichele chair) since the war. This is a first step on to a larger study by the authors.

The Discussion Papers series started more than 18 years ago and has now reached 116 issues gathering mostly the contributions of faculty and students at Oxford together with some papers of visiting scholars. The vast majority of these papers have since been published, so that the series functions as an organised central repository for the advance preview of the Oxford scholarship in the field. Over this period, the stock of papers has grown at a mostly uniform rate, hovering around 6 new issues per year, apart from two exceptionally productive years (1997 and 2012), when 10 or more papers were added.

The Discussion Papers are linked to RePEc, which allows monitoring the popularity of the series through its download statistics. At the time of writing, the Oxford Discussion Papers rank 627<sup>th</sup> in the list of 3054 working papers series tracked by RePEc since 1998. In terms of working papers explicitly focused on economic and social history, the Oxford series comes in third place (among 19) after the former Econ WPA and the Working Papers in Economic History of the Carlos III University.

In interpreting the evolution through time of the download statistics care must be taken to account for the built-in growth due simply to the expansion in the stock of papers. With a few exceptions, most papers enter the series with a large number of downloads, which quickly taper off after a few months. Consequently, rather than reporting raw download statistics, we ran a simple ARMAX model relating actual downloads to up to two lags of changes in the stock of papers plus a linear trend.<sup>1</sup> The model with the best fit was an ARMA(3,[4]) and the estimation results on Table 1 imply that a new paper added an average of 20 downloads in its first month in the series. However, there was quick reversal to trend as three quarters of the effect is eliminated the next month. The linear trend itself is insignificant, apparently rejecting an increase in the number of downloads for exogenous reasons, such as the increasing use of the internet for the proliferation of research.

**Table 1: ARMAX model of downloads**

Variables	Downloads	ARMA
$\Delta \text{stock}_t$	19.571** (9.135)	
$\Delta \text{stock}_{t-1}$	-15.298** (7.315)	
$\Delta \text{stock}_{t-2}$	-3.295 (3.819)	
Trend	0.001 (0.003)	
Constant	-0.056 (0.700)	
AR(1)		-0.788*** (0.113)
AR(2)		-0.769*** (0.136)
AR(3)		-0.781*** (0.109)
MA(4)		-0.883*** (0.138)
Observations	182	182
chi2	98.583	98.583
Log-lik.	-898.307	-898.307

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

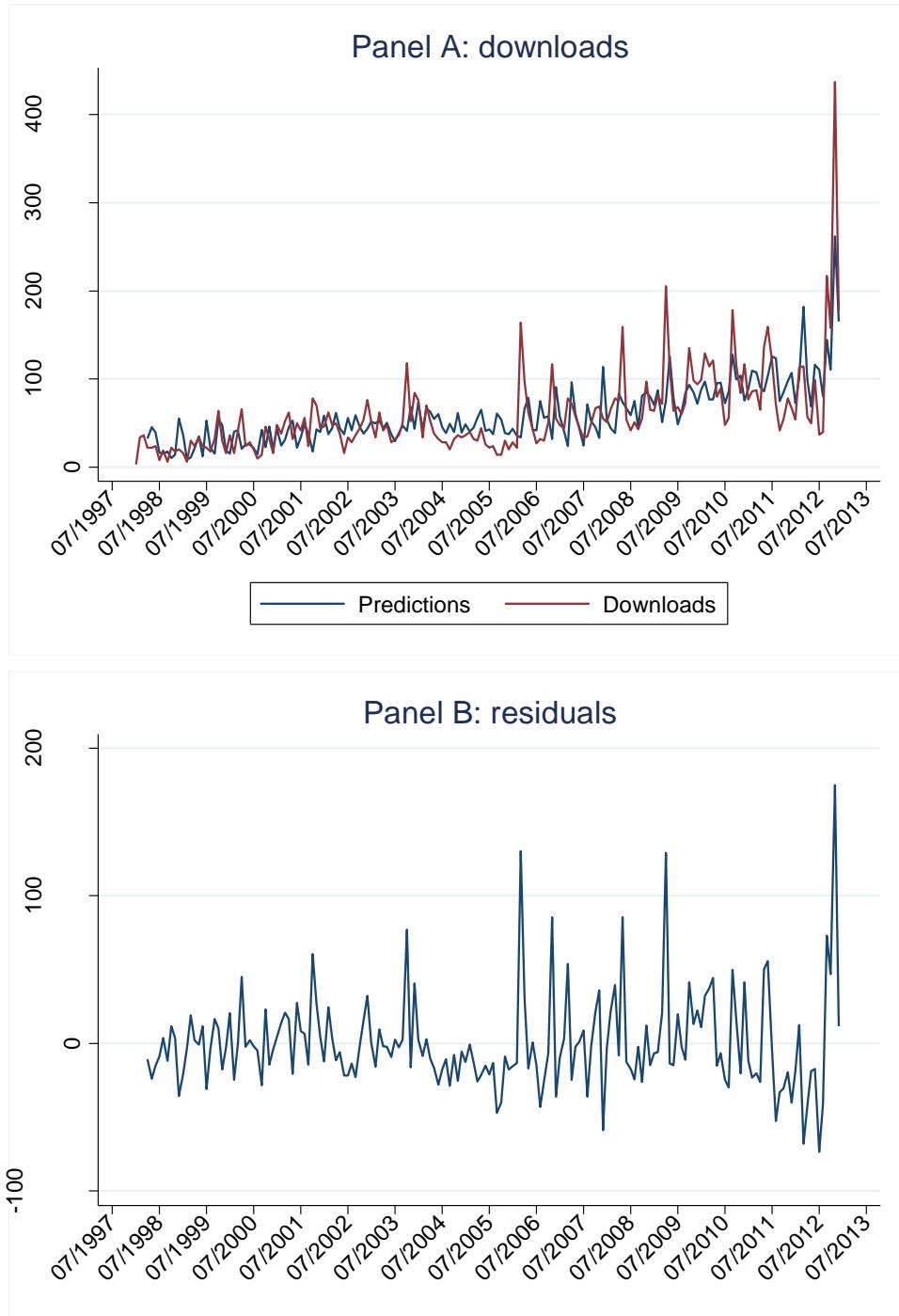
Figure 1 plots the raw data against the model's predictions, whereas the second panel plots the residuals, which do not suggest a sustained increase in the underlying popularity of the series over

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<sup>1</sup> We pre-tested the number of downloads for stationarity and rejected the presence of a unit root in a model with trend.

time, once we control for the increasing stock of papers and the temporary effect of new papers in the series.<sup>2</sup> There is, however, a growing volatility in the residuals.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1**



<sup>2</sup> Bai and Perron tests yield no breaks in the residual series.

<sup>3</sup> We equally rejected conditional heteroskedasticity from the correlogram of the squared errors of the ARMAX model and several tests of white noise.

# Economic History in Oxford: A Centennial Celebration

Introductory remarks to the 100<sup>th</sup> Oxford discussion paper in economic history

by N.H. Dimsdale and L. Arena

The appearance of the 100<sup>th</sup> Discussion Paper in Economic History is a milestone, which provides a good opportunity to review the recent progress of the subject in Oxford. This note is primarily concerned with the evolution of the MSc in Economic and Social History and it seeks to place this in the broader context of the development of economic history in Oxford. Although the chair in Economic History was first introduced in 1931, its first two holders, George Norman Clark (who was Chair until 1943) and William Keith Hancock (who held the Chair between 1944 and 1949) followed a very historical approach and did not produce any distinguished students in the field. Then, we start this brief survey with the appointment of Hrothgar John Habakkuk, who did so much to advance the standing of the subject during his time as Chichele Professor. He was elected to the Chair in 1950 and kept this position until 1967. He devoted much energy to the supervision of a small group of graduate students, who produced some distinguished DPhil theses<sup>4</sup> and who later became prominent and inspiring figures in the field. Several leading economic historians were students of Habakkuk, including Ian Byatt<sup>5</sup>, Roderick Floud<sup>6</sup>, Patrick O'Brien<sup>7</sup>, Garry Hawke<sup>8</sup> and Nick von Tunzelmann<sup>9</sup> to mention a few examples. While Habakkuk was an outstanding economic historian with strong theoretical leanings, Oxford also had the services of Prof. Asa Briggs who was a leading social historian<sup>10</sup>. Asa Briggs contributed to the growing reputation of the University in the rapidly expanding area of social history.

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<sup>4</sup> Between 1950 and 1972, Habakkuk supervised not less than 19 D.Phil. students (*Oxford University Gazette*).

<sup>5</sup> I.C.R. Byatt wrote his D.Phil. thesis in the Faculty of Social Studies between 1955 and 1962 on "The British Electricity Industry, 1875-1914".

<sup>6</sup> R.C. Floud wrote his D.Phil. thesis in the Faculty of Modern History between 1964 and 1970 on "The metal-working machine tool industry in England (1850-1914), with special reference to Greenwood and Battay Ltd.".

<sup>7</sup> P.K. O'Brien wrote his D.Phil. thesis in the Faculty of Social Studies between 1957 and 1966 on "Government revenue, 1793-1815: A study of fiscal and financial policy in the war against France".

<sup>8</sup> G.R. Hawke wrote his D.Phil. thesis in the Faculty of Social Studies between 1965 and 1969 on "The effects of the railways on the growth of the economy of England and Wales 1840-70".

<sup>9</sup> G.N. von Tunzelmann wrote his D.Phil. thesis in the Faculty of Social Studies between 1967 and 1970 on "Economic aspects of the introduction of steam power in Britain up to 1850 with special reference to textile industries". First supervised by Prof. Habakkuk, he then switched to Prof. Mathias in TT 1969.

<sup>10</sup> After an education in Economics, Asa Briggs worked at Bletchley Park from 1942 to 1945 with the Intelligence Corps during WWII. In 1945, he became a Fellow of Worcester College (until 1955) before being appointed University Lecturer in Recent Social and Economic History (1950-1955). During his two last years at Oxford, he was also a Fellow of Nuffield College. He then moved to the University of Leeds.

While Habakkuk concentrated on the supervision of a handful of graduates, the teaching of PPE students was in the hands of the charismatic Australian Max Hartwell<sup>11</sup>. Although he was a traditional economic historian, Max was an enthusiast for New Economic History or Cliometrics. He did much to encourage work in this area and introduced the first PPE course in “quantitative economic history” in Hilary term 1968 which he taught with C. Matthews, M. Abramovitz and P. David. One of his most prominent students was Mark Thomas who became Professor at the University of Virginia. He also secured the appointment of Nick Crafts to a Fellowship in Economics at University College, in 1977. Nick was to inject more economic reasoning into the teaching of economic history. He also encouraged economists such as Nicholas Dimsdale to take a closer interest in economic history. One of his most outstanding graduate students was Steve Broadberry, who was to have a distinguished career in quantitative economic history.

When Habakkuk was elected to become Master of Jesus College he gave up the Chichele chair in 1967 and was succeeded by Peter Matthias in 1969. He worked hard to promote the cause of economic history among both economists and historians. His main achievement was the introduction of the Joint Degree of History and Economics, which attracted some able students to economic history, including Tim Leunig. Patrick O’Brien was an enthusiastic teacher on this course, which remained relatively small in size, but high in academic quality. There were however some problems in fitting the Joint School into the Collegiate structure of Oxford, despite the strong demand for the course from students.

Economic history in Oxford was transformed by the appointment of Charles Feinstein to the Chichele Chair in 1989 which he kept until 1999. He was then Professor of Economic History at the University of York, where he taught social and economic history. By then he had made a major contribution to the national income accounts of the UK. This provided the statistical basis for the work which he and Matthews did on British economic growth<sup>12</sup>. His work enabled the course of the economy to be analysed since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. At York he designed courses which combined both economic and social history. His interest in social history was encouraged by his wife Anne Digby, who is a noted social historian.

Feinstein planned to transform the teaching of economic history in Oxford by setting up a graduate course which became known as the MSc in Economic and Social History. It was to be a one year taught course, which provided ready access to the existing D.Phil. in Economic History. The proposal

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<sup>11</sup> R.M. Hartwell started teaching British Economic History (1830-1873) in Trinity Term 1957 (*Oxford University Gazette*).

<sup>12</sup> Matthews R.C.O., Feinstein C.H., Odling-Smee J.C., (1982), *British Economic Growth : 1856-1973*, Stanford University Press.

for introducing a taught graduate course in economic history was initially put forward by Nick Crafts. It was this idea which was developed and realized by Charles Feinstein. The original MSc included not only economic and social history, but also demography and medical history, which came under the Wellcome Foundation. This arrangement worked well for about ten years, as explained by Richard Smith. It was then decided that the course in Economic and Social History should be independent.

Charles Feinstein built up a team of academics who would realize his plans for the course. A key figure was Avner Offer, who had worked with Charles at York. Avner was appointed as Reader in Economic History and later succeeded Charles as Chichele Professor when he vacated the Chair in 1999. He did much of the detailed planning of the MSc. course, while the ESRC made a useful contribution by requiring as a condition for funding that students take a basic course in quantitative methods. This paper formed part of the introduction to the course, which provided a common basis for students from a broad range of backgrounds.

As explained by Avner, Charles sought to attract able students with a wide range of interests. He did not want to impose pre-requisites, such as the previous study of economics at the undergraduate level. When there were problems over arranging teaching for the course on Quantitative Methods, he undertook to do it himself. His devotion to economic history and to the students on the course was an inspiration to those who worked with him. His own broad approach to economic history enabled him to work effectively with demographers and medical historians, as explained by Richard Smith.

Charles attracted some excellent economic historians, such as James Foreman Peck, and he asked Nicholas Dimsdale to design and teach a paper on British Macroeconomic history. When Charles retired, he was succeeded by Avner Offer in 2000, who continued to encourage students with a wide ranging approach to economic history and a strong personal motivation. The History Faculty was fortunate in attracting Jane Humphries to All Souls, who was encouraged by Charles Feinstein to apply to the Chichele readership. Charles was her undergraduate teacher in Cambridge and they kept contact since then. She has made an important contribution to the course, which also benefited from the lively contributions of Paul David of Oxford and Stanford to seminars and to the supervision of graduate students.

Meanwhile the Economics Department under the leadership of David Hendry decided to put greater emphasis on the teaching and research in economic history. With Hendry's support, Bob Allen and Knick Harley were appointed to the Department. These appointments did much to strengthen the contribution of economists to the MSc. With such strength in teaching and research and combined

with a well-designed programme, the course was able to attract students of high quality from a wide range of countries. Among the outstanding students were Tim Leunig and Joachim Voth. Both of whom have commented on their experience with economic history in Oxford. Other students who wrote DPhil theses of distinction were Ed Butchart, Steven Nicholas and Liam Brunt to mention a few names, but there were many more.

The high level of research activity has generated an impressive collection of essays which have appeared as Discussion Papers in Economic History. Most of the papers in the collection have been written by students or members of the faculty, while some have been written by visiting academics. The Discussion Papers give a good indication of the scope of work in economic history being done in Oxford.

## **John Landers**

Former Principal of Hertford College, Oxford

Quondam Fellow of All Souls' College, Oxford

My professional specialism is historical demography rather than economic history as such. I've never formally studied economic history in the sense of taking degree (or any other) courses in the subject, but the work of economic historians has been very important to me in my demographic work, and I've benefitted greatly from contact with economic historians in Oxford since I came back here in 1991. Economic history must always, of necessity, have an important bearing on historical demography, since the latter sits between economic history, social history and population biology and its practitioners need to know what's going on the other side of each of those fences. The discipline has, however, had a particular importance for me since the explanations I've tried to construct for the historical phenomena that interest me draw heavily on contemporary developments in the economic sphere.

I got into historical demography through my Oxford undergraduate degree in Human Sciences which had (and still has) a demography paper. I had left school early and come back to do my 'A' levels at a Technical College which had never sent anyone to either Oxford or Cambridge. So I would never have thought of applying had the mother of a friend of mine - herself an Oxford graduate – not suggested that I try, and I became very enthusiastic when I found out about Oxford's Human Sciences degree.

Human Sciences was only a year or two old when I came up in 1972 and I was attracted to it because of its inter-disciplinary character, and - specifically - the opportunity it offered to study both social and biological sciences. I had wanted to take Biology with History and English at 'A' level, but that wasn't possible then (I think there's more flexibility now – not least because so many students take four 'A' levels which was extremely unusual back in those days). My Technical College provided no specific preparation for Oxbridge entrance but at that time it was possible to take a schedule of general papers which largely made up for this, and I was able to make special arrangements to take the entrance exam on my own in the autumn after my 'A' levels.

Demography particularly appealed to me among the subjects included in Human Sciences because of the intrinsically inter-disciplinary perspective it offered and the way in which it combined the technical scientific area of 'formal demography' with the more humanistic, interpretative, domain of 'population studies'. Once I'd decided to apply for graduate work in demography I naturally

gravitated to the historical side of the discipline since history always fascinated me. There were also then (as now) some big gaps in our factual knowledge of population history, and I liked the idea of being able to find out things that no one had known before rather than simply reinterpreting existing data.

The Cambridge Group - under the leadership of Tony Wrigley, Peter Laslett and Roger Schofield – was then this country's centre for research in historical demography, and I was fortunate enough to get an SSRC studentship to do a PhD. there. Initially I planned to work on nineteenth-century English mortality decline, using Registrar-General's data, but I became increasingly interested in pre-nineteenth-century cities, and my eventual topic was London's long-eighteenth-century demography based on the technique of family reconstitution. My main focus was on mortality and the persistence of recorded burial surpluses. It had long been assumed that these reflected very high mortality (rather than low fertility), but there was at that time remarkably little hard data to back up this assumption.

My research yielded unequivocal evidence that mortality in eighteenth-century London had indeed been very high, but the trend was puzzling since it seemed to be at its worst – both absolutely and relatively – in the early decades when real wages in London were at a peak. I'd had no contact with economists, or economic historians, in Oxford, and when I began my research my frame of reference was essentially population biology, relying heavily on such things as population density as causal factors. But I realised that it was impossible to understand what was going on in London without understanding the economics of house-building and how this was affected by the structure of land ownership and –particularly – government's use of usury legislation to finance war-making by manipulating the credit market.

The problem of metropolitan mortality fitted into my broader interest in explaining pre-nineteenth-century mortality variations. When I started out the prevailing view was that these had to be explained, either by variations in living standards (as indexed by real wages) or by 'autonomous' factors such as pathogenic mutation or climate change. Since the former, 'endogenous', explanation was inconsistent with the data then becoming available – particularly that yielded by Wrigley and Schofield's English study – the balance of opinion had come down heavily on the side of exogenous-determination interpreted in terms of the so-called 'autonomous death rate'. For a variety of reasons I was dissatisfied with this interpretation and this dissatisfaction took me back to economic history and a focus on the ways in which the spatial organisation of economic activity– and particularly its spatial integration – affected levels of exposure to infection through the movement of people and pathogens.

After Cambridge I'd worked in the oil industry briefly and then taught in the Anthropology Department at UCL before returning to Oxford as University Lecturer in Historical Demography with a Fellowship of All Souls College. The Fellowship at All Souls was a powerful attraction, but I was increasingly seeing myself as a historian rather than a biological anthropologist and I liked the idea of working in a history faculty. At that time Oxford had also assembled a very distinguished cluster of researchers in historical demography and cognate fields. Tony Wrigley and Richard Smith were both at All Souls, Anne Kussmaul had been elected to the early-modern Readership and the historical epidemiologist Mary Dobson was attached to the Wellcome Unit.

The graduate programmes in Economic and Social History were underway when I came back to Oxford in the early '90s so I can't give a 'before and after' assessment. But I do think it's very impressive what has been achieved over a very difficult period for the discipline as a whole. The most obvious manifestation of this is simply the number of people the University has been able to attract and the diversity and quality of what we offer. There's now a sufficient critical mass to ensure the future of the discipline here and also – given the number of overseas students – it has a solid financial foundation. I think it's very valuable that economic and social history are studied together and that the masters students are offered courses in the history of science and technology enabling them to view the economic past in a proper historical context.

I'm hesitant to say what Oxford's greatest contribution to the profession has been in absolute terms as I don't feel qualified to judge the work of economic historians, but what has impressed me is the extent to which the major figures have 'spoken to' the concerns of those in other historical disciplines particularly of course social and demographic history - in marked contrast to much of what now appears in the journal literature. The most important element, for me has been Oxford's contribution to the 'standard of living' debate, but I also owe a lot to the work of Patrick O'Brien on state and economy in long-eighteenth-century Britain. This has been a key influence on my own approach to the interface between demographic, economic and political/military history.

I've been involved with Oxford one way or another for most of the last forty years and there have of course been great changes over that time. The most obvious of these is the 'size and shape' of the University; it's a great deal bigger than it was, and graduate students now make up around a third of the total whereas they were rare birds when I first arrived. The really dramatic expansion, of course, has been in taught graduate courses which barely existed forty years ago, and those that did were titled 'Bachelor' or 'Diploma'. The number of contract research staff has also greatly expanded, and College teaching Fellows are now a very small fraction of Congregation. This inevitably raises questions as to the role of Colleges in the University and there's a real danger that they will grow

more and more remote from Oxford's research activity as these increase in importance. Colleges, however, are and will remain crucial to the delivery of undergraduate teaching, particularly in the Humanities.

Overall I think academic standards have risen over the last generation. We expect much more from our undergraduates – and they in turn work much harder than we did. The amount of time and effort invested in undergraduate teaching is much greater now than in the '70s, and this puts a great strain on our academic staff since the demands of research and publication have also increased.

Demographers don't have a very good track record when it comes to forecasting the future. For myself, I plan, to go back to primary research on mortality in eighteenth-century London with a detailed study of the mortality 'spikes' that accompanied the transition from war to peace in the capital. I'm also working on a successor volume to *The Field on the Forge* which will look at the interaction between population, economy and that state in Europe between the late seventeenth century and the First World War.

The future of economic history must currently be judged a very uncertain one, caught as it is between the scientific abstractions of academic economics and the studied innumeracy of so much of historical *academe* (as of the humanities generally). I firmly believe, however, that the prospects for the discipline are bright if it can forge closer links with social and demographic history to form part of a broader history of collective material life. This prospect is likely to require a somewhat lesser preoccupation with the technicalities of economic theory and a greater sense of historical context. It will be much more likely to come about if economic historians are located in History departments or similar *milieu* where they can work alongside other historians.

## **Timothy Leunig**

Reader in Economic History, LSE

1. Why did you decide to study economic history at Oxford?

I didn't – I wanted to do political history and economics, and Oxford offered it. Then I found I was good at economic history, and stayed.

2. Did Oxford provide you with opportunities that you would not have found elsewhere?

Yes. Tutorials as an undergraduate, and the chance to mix with both very good faculty (Patrick O'Brian, Nick Dimsdale, Charles Feinstein, Avner Offer, James Foreman-Peck, Richard Smith, Tony Wrigley, etc) and very good students (Joachim Voth, Ed Burchard, Liam Brunt, Tom Nicholas, etc).

3. Who were your primary influences while at Oxford?

Nick, Charles, James, Joachim.

4. -Did you have much contact with the historians while at Oxford?

No.

5. What was the most significant academic work that came out of Oxford while you were there?

"Pessimism Perpetuated" by Charles Feinstein.

6. What changes did you notice in Oxford while you were there (or since you left)?

New faculty since I left.

7. What are your immediate academic plans?

I remain at the LSE, but am on leave to the Department for Education for 2 years.

8. What advice would you give to the current economic history students at Oxford?

Write about big topics, and aim high with journals.

9. What about the future of economic history?

Not strong, I fear...

10. Where will its home be? Pessimists argue that economic history is increasingly becoming isolated between increasingly intolerant economics departments and history faculties where the 'cultural revolution' has turned empiricism into a dirty word.

I think that is fair.

## Avner Offer

Former Chichele Professor in Economic History, All Souls' College

1. Why did you decide to study economic history?

I didn't study economic history. I studied history, my doctorate developed into an economic history thesis, and my first post was in an economic history department.<sup>13</sup>

2. What attracted you to Oxford?

I had taken my doctorate and had been a JRF at Oxford, so I knew the place well.

3. How much contact did you have with the historians and the economists while at Oxford?

I had a good deal of personal contact with the historians through history faculty committees, even in the 1990s when I was in the Social Studies faculty. My contacts with economists were mostly in the colleges, Nuffield, which had an excellent group of economists, and later at All Souls. The colleges also provided good contacts with other social scientists. At a personal level, I made good friends with several historians and economists here. I also valued my interaction with doctoral students in social science disciplines at Nuffield College during my years there.

4. Where do you think Oxford has made the greatest contribution to the profession?

Oxford has had several established senior posts in economic history for many decades now, and distinguished economic historians even earlier. The Chichele Chair, established at All Souls the 1930s, has provided a focal point for the discipline, and the readers and lecturers (now mostly professors) were often no less distinguished. Many good economic and social historians have taken their doctorates here, and the launch of the graduate course in 1992 was a turning point in this respect. I like to think that the distinctive contribution since then has been in the breadth of approach. This was established by Charles Feinstein, and was reflected in the structure and content of the core course.<sup>14</sup> In the United States during these years, the discipline has developed as an adjunct to economics, and often subservient to its doctrines and research methods. Charles Feinstein's approach (and mine afterwards) was to look for high quality students, and that any legitimate investigation was welcome, without too much concern for disciplinary boundaries. The scope of interest was enlarged by the participation (in the first

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<sup>13</sup> Tim Nunan, has posted a long interview with me at <http://timothynunan.com/2011/07/28/the-historical-gadfly-episode-9-avner-offers-journey-from-social-democracy-to-market-liberalism/> A transcript is available.

<sup>14</sup> Avner Offer, 'Charles Hilliard Feinstein, 1932-2004' *Transactions of the British Academy*, 153. Biographical Memoirs of Fellows, 6 (2008), pp. 189-212. This is also available as a University of Oxford Discussion Paper in Economic and Social History paper no. 72.

decade or so) of the historians of medicine, science and technology in the core course, and in many of the advanced papers.

##### 5. Why and how was the graduate programme in economic and social history created?

Graduate training in economic history before 1992 was carried out through the D.Phil, mostly within the faculty of history, but also in economics. For example, Paul Johnson (in history) and Steve Broadberry (in economics), were both supervised by Nick Crafts. I myself completed an Oxford D.Phil. in History in 1979. The taught graduate course was created in response to a requirement set out by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). At the time the ESRC carried weight and provided several scholarships. There was a good cluster of staff: I was appointed in 1991 to the Nuffield readership and Ann Kussmaul replaced Joan Thirsk at St. Hilda's. James Foreman-Peck had replaced Patrick O'Brien at St. Antony's a year before, Richard Smith directed the Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine, and Paul David had just arrived at All Souls. Charles set up the new course within the History faculty, but negotiated with the Social Studies faculty to manage and finance the course jointly. This arrangement continues, and has made it easier to collaborate across departmental and now even divisional boundaries.

Soon after I was appointed, Charles asked me to assemble a core course<sup>15</sup>. I had developed just such a course the year before for third-year undergraduates in economic history at the University of York (tough it was never taught), and this was adapted for Oxford. Charles chose to create a large and varied choice of advanced papers, and he had the imagination to realize that teaching them would appeal to the dons even beyond their stint. This brought many excellent Oxford scholars into the course. Occasionally courses were even provided by academic visitors. Initially each of the core course seminars was meant to be attended by an expert, but this did not work well and was not continued. I ended up providing both lectures and seminars as a coherent whole for about fifteen years. Quantitative methods 1 and 2 were initially taught by AK and JFP respectively, but this course did not have the same continuity. Ann Kussmaul was a valued scholar and colleague, but a serious illness soon intervened, and she had to withdraw. The course opened in October 1992 with 16 students, about a third of them in history of medicine and science. The content evolved, but the framework persisted. What varied over the years was the number of lectures and seminars and assessment arrangements.

##### 6. What changes did you notice in Oxford during your time here?

The main difference has been the number of dedicated staff. In the first decade there was some turnover, and at one time we were down to three postholder staff in the two faculties. The large

graduate numbers, and their manifest quality, gave credibility to the discipline in Oxford. In consequence, the History Faculty did not leave posts vacant for long, and the number of posts in economics increased, bringing in a succession of very able colleagues. In no particular order, these included Jane Humphries, Bob Allen, Knick Harley, Rui Esteves, Brian A'Hearn, Deb Oxley, and James Fenske. In its turn, these scholars attracted exceptional students. The range of staff (and the resources of the University beyond them) extended the range of supervision, and enhanced the reputation of the group as a centre for the discipline. A sequence of excellent post-doctoral colleagues also had a considerable impact. The large changes in faculty and divisional structure had little effect on our activities. I have always felt that the intensity and range of economic history at Oxford provided a special experience. It already felt like a 'golden age' in the 1990s, and has not changed very much since.

#### 7. What are your immediate academic plans?

Despite my retirement, I have never worked more intensively. I have three major projects: a book about the Nobel Prize in economics, now approaching completion; a large study 'From Social Democracy to Market Liberalism' on the shift in policy norms over the decades, which will occupy me for a few more years, and a study of people in the landscape in European painting c. 1790-1940, with the tentative title *The Long Afternoon* is already in the making. This is only partly socio-economic, and arises from a long-standing interest in painting and its history. I am also working on several articles and book-chapter collaborations which are related to these projects.

#### 8. What advice would you give to the current economic history students at Oxford?

Economic and social history provides the proper blend of social science approaches. It is an opportunity to pursue interests and challenges without worrying too much about disciplinary boundaries. It is also a good foundation for teaching and research in several disciplines, and for work in business, government or advocacy, or law. It is both intellectual and vocational. I would congratulate the students for making the right choice, and would express confidence in their future prospects.

#### 9. What about the future of economic history?

I spent about a decade in a dedicated department of economic history at the University of York. From the start, I was convinced that the undergraduate education it provided (mostly British and European since 1700) was too narrow. On the other hand, economic history is a good discipline at the graduate level. Its questions will always be of interest to historians, and provide a reality

check for economists. They also concern the choices made by government, society and business. It makes sense for the discipline to exist at the learned society level. The main reason for it to form a separate entity at the graduate level is to make sure that students acquire a range of necessary competences. So long as intellectual inquiry and scholarship continue, the questions of economic and social history will be investigated. The mathematical turn in economics, and the cultural and linguistic turns in history are both inimical to the study of life as it is broadly lived, experienced, and structured. That makes a case for some institutional autonomy for economic history. I have published my reflections on the discipline.<sup>16</sup> But I am not too concerned. It will continue to exist in some form or another.

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<sup>16</sup> 'A Dialogue with the Past', in Pat Hudson (ed.), *Living Economic and Social History* (Glasgow: Economic History Society, 2001), pp. 254-257.

## **Richard Smith**

Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure and Downing College Cambridge

On viewing the world of economic history in Britain and Europe it takes very little persuading to see that Oxford University now commands the heights with its distinguished staff and extremely capable graduate students. It might be supposed that such recognition may be given with some reluctance when commenting, as I do, from a Cambridge observation point. However, in the two decades during which the MSc and MPhil in Economic and Social History have been bedded down the subject in Oxford has displayed an overt health that is far less evident elsewhere in the UK and perhaps internationally more generally. These qualities would seem to owe much to a particularly favourable relationship between History and the Social Sciences in Oxford that has both enabled a staffing structure and appointments of individuals to key posts which in combination has nurtured a vision of how best to develop the subject within a uniquely broad-based set of concepts and methods. It has also benefited from an organizational structure in which certain colleges have been able to play a role in grounding this vision which might surprise those who traditionally view Oxford as lacking in more centralized or focused command structures, particularly when it is a matter of faculty or departmental matters.

While economic history in Oxford had many distinguished practitioners before the emergence of the MSc in Economic and Social History in 1992, the appointment of Charles Feinstein to the Chichele Chair of Economic History in 1989 with his strategic vision and undemonstrative and highly engaging manner, but clear willingness to lead from the front, marked a sea change in the identity of the subject in Oxford. Charles Feinstein offered a distinctive approach in mobilizing a team from what was initially a somewhat eclectic grouping of economic and social historians, historians of medicine, technology and science as well as economists. While it is regrettable that this ensemble has not been retained with the historians of science and medicine going their own way with a separate master's course, Feinstein's aspiration to fashion a focal point for the pursuit of genuine historical social science underpinned this initiative in the early 1990s. This aspiration was certainly facilitated by the appointment of Avner Offer to the Readership in Recent Economic History who immediately began teaching a core course, a precursor to the current and astutely designed 'What happened and why? Starting research in economic and social history'. The range of theories and associated approaches to which students have been exposed through this core course ensured that no one analytical framework was given an overarching privileged status. Indeed a significant intrusion of arguments

from sociology was ensured as well as exposure to ideas from psychology, economic anthropology and collective action theory to name just a few of the alternatives to any exclusive or steadfast commitment to individual rationality and market equilibrium as organizing principles for understanding past economic and social behaviour. As Avner Offer has put it, this course design and its specific contents ensured a respect for ‘disparate visions’ and a basic belief that there were ‘different pathways to the truth’<sup>17</sup>.

The acquisition of an array of more specialised advanced optional courses from a co-operative group of historians, economists and sociologists ensured that candidates for this post-graduate degree would have opportunities to shape their ideas and design dissertation topics in decidedly more original ways than if their options were chosen from a somewhat conventional menu of the type likely to have been offered within an orthodox Economics department. Charles Feinstein’s masterly course design has weathered well and was sustained with verve by Avner Offer when appointed as Feinstein’s successor to the Chichele Chair to ensure that it grew in stature and attracted a corps of highly able students. Indeed both Feinstein and Offer were recipients of awards given respectively by the American Economic History Association and the UK Economic History Society for their contributions to teaching on this course.

The success of the Oxford graduate programme raises interesting questions about the disciplinary context within which economic history is most likely to thrive. When viewed superficially this Oxford success story would appear to buck the trend in which economic history as an identifiable sub-discipline has largely vanished from most UK History departments. The MPhil and MSc in Economic and Social History in Oxford are firmly located from an administrative perspective within the Faculty of Modern History and were developed there initially by post-holders whose appointments were within that Faculty. Notwithstanding the formal management of the postgraduate economic history courses within Modern History many of those who make significant teaching contributions to them have appointments in the Economics Faculty. Also it is noteworthy that many of the post-holders past and present with formal appointments in History had previously held appointments either in Oxford or elsewhere in Departments of Economics. There can be no doubting the strong presence of teachers whose formal training both as under- and post-graduates was in Economics rather than in

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<sup>17</sup> A. Offer, ‘Charles Feinstein (1932-2005) and British Historical National Accounts’, University of Oxford Discussion Papers in Economic and Social History 70 (2008), p. 17

History. Nonetheless following the example of Charles Feinstein these individuals have developed a remarkable rapport with Oxford-trained historians whose backgrounds revealed no such links, since unlike the Cambridge History Tripos, there is no compulsory economic history element in the History honours course taught within the Modern History School.<sup>18</sup> That distinctive feature in Cambridge History, however, has not provided a catalyst for strong collaborative teaching involving economic historians in the History and Economics Faculties and other departments within the Cambridge School of Humanities and Social Sciences. So how has this come to be such a distinctive feature of inter-faculty relationships in Oxford?

As noted above part of the answer to this question must concern the key role played by certain individuals. However their capacity to generate cooperation on the scale achieved owes much to some aspects of the culture of learning and the surprising absence of institutional obstacles to interdisciplinary relations that prevail in Oxford. I can relate my own experience as a post-holder in the Oxford History Faculty while also a fellow of All Souls from 1983 to 1994.

I came in 1983 to what was then termed a ‘new blood’ lecturership in Historical Demography to offer teaching in a subject that then had a limited presence in the Modern History School. While I never taught a paper in the undergraduate course during my eleven years that was devoted exclusively to demographic history I quickly became involved in making substantial contributions in the Final Honours School curriculum by offering lecture series with economic-demographic emphases on the Final Honour School papers on Seventeenth Century Society and the Special Subject ‘A late Medieval Economy’ through collaborations with extremely supportive History Faculty colleagues such as Paul Slack and Barbara Harvey. It was fortuitous that soon after my arrival a substantial long overdue revision to the Modern History School was spearheaded by Robin Briggs of All Souls who had also been instrumental in persuading the History Faculty to bid for my new blood lecturership which enabled me to introduce an entirely new optional course on Quantification in History to the first-year Preliminary course that offered a further outlet for teaching using source materials that lay along the interface between economic and demographic history. At the same time

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<sup>18</sup> The existence of the joint school of History and Economics does distinguish Oxford from Cambridge and does make for formal collaborations across the two faculties, although the small numbers of those going on from this course to do post-graduate work means that this is can never be a major source for post-graduate recruitment in Oxford when contrasts are drawn with Cambridge. It has nonetheless been the starting point for the careers of some exceptionally fine economic and social historians some of whom have done the Oxford course

History placed no obstacles in my path when I taught a demography component with the Human Sciences degree and with David Coleman set up a new PPE paper ;'Comparative Demographic Systems,' which I believe still exists. Simultaneously there was much encouragement from colleagues such as John Goldthorpe, then doyen of Nuffield sociologists, who was interested in many of the methods used by historical demographers in their exploitation of individual-level census data and A.H. (Chelly) Halsey who was encouraging in the work that I was then doing on Ageing and its relation to welfare provision to such an extent that it seemed only natural for me to be an active participant in Sociology seminars in Nuffield. Within a relatively short period of time I found myself supervising graduate students for Social Studies, Social Anthropology and History. While links with Economics were more limited I did become involved as a result of my interests in medieval English peasant demography and household economies in co-organising a seminar on peasant society and economy with development economists who gravitated towards Queen Elizabeth House, then directed by Robert Cassen, who had recently co-authored a major study in the demography of India. It was also for me extremely stimulating to have Amartya Sen as a colleague at All Souls College whose seminal work on famines was then proving of great interest to demographic historians then assessing the vulnerability of pre-industrial societies to subsistence crises and he was especially interested in engaging with this empirical research by historical demographers that was taking his famine theory very seriously as they reflected critically on some of the oversimplified assumptions in some aspects of Malthusian thinking. I make no apology for this digression into my personal experiences in Oxford during the 1980s since my engagement as a historical social scientist in that setting stood in marked contrast to the situation I had left in Cambridge where I had been a member of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure whose existence was underwritten by the then Social Science Research Council but had very limited, some would say fraught, relations with the History Faculty and perhaps of equal significance with what was admittedly a far weaker, less prestigious and somewhat anarchic social science community that lacked the intellectual standing that flowed in Oxford from the presence of PPE and the centre of excellence that Nuffield College provided.

In 1989 Charles Feinstein took up the Chichele Chair of Economic History at All Souls and thereby became my colleague. His arrival coincided with my appointment in 1989 as Director of the Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine which had under Charles Webster's leadership acquired a considerable reputation for developing an approach distinguished by being a genuine social history of medicine as opposed to a history of ideas and I was then co-editing a newly founded journal that was promoting the publication of research with that orientation.. It was an easy task to collaborate

with Charles Feinstein in designing a Master's programme in which there would be alongside economic history, various forms of social history including demography and the social history of medicine with a heavy emphasis on the history of health and disease. Charles Feinstein somehow managed to persuade the university authorities that those taking this one-year course should be rewarded with a MSc degree to distinguish it from the highly ambiguous Oxford MA and the two-year MPhil. The course was also designed to provide an appropriate research training core that would satisfy ESRC that it had the appropriate social scientific credentials for positioning students to undertake research in those areas and hence worthy of studentships from that funding body. I remain convinced that his personal skills in fostering the cooperation of so many colleagues from both within the History Faculty and of equal importance outside it, especially among the economists, were perfectly designed to secure the positive participation of so many from diverse corners of the social sciences in Oxford that had made the late 1980s for me such a rewarding experience.

All Souls College was immensely supportive too and vitally important since the college had managed to persuade the university authorities to allow me to retain my fellowship there although I had changed my university post. All Souls had just elected Tony Wrigley into a senior research fellowship and John Landers came into the Historical Demography post I had recently vacated and very soon Paul David joined the group as a senior research fellow. The landscape had been transformed and the core Tuesday evening seminar in the Wharton Room of All Souls College with a substantially swollen group of able graduate students came to possess a vitality that it had not previously displayed, providing outlets for an array of historically inclined social scientists which certainly contained a substantial number of individuals who appointment were in Economics but also many who were not. This heterogeneity of backgrounds gave the discussions a diversity that was both infectious and conducive to genuine originality of thought. This quality has been retained along with many other Oxford settings for the presentation of research by the staff and students involved in this course. All Souls managed to strengthen its commitment to this subject area still further with the appointments of Jane Humphries and Deborah Oxley so that within the wider Oxbridge environment no other college could be viewed as hosting such a powerful and highly successful community of leading economic and social historians with a remarkable diversity of approaches. The All Souls visiting fellowship programme regularly injected distinguished new faces into the seminar-attending community to the great benefit of the post-graduate community.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> To add further icing to the cake the appointments of Bob Allen and Knick Harley, both in Economics, made further additions to the growing centre of excellence.

That success is reflected in many ways. No other UK institution has generated so many winners of the Gerschenkron Prize from its doctoral candidates and the one Cambridge-based winner of that prestigious award had done her apprenticeship as a master's student on the Oxford course prior to her move to the Fens. In Cambridge the majority of recent appointments to lectureships in economic and social history have been awarded to scholars who did there apprenticeship on the Master's course in Oxford. Observing these developments from Cambridge it appears that the more generalised although conceptually demanding intellectual environment within which economic history has come to be practiced in Oxford provides the secret of its evident success. I remain convinced that this high standing will be preserved in future providing that the subject continues to be pursued with a profound respect for both this intellectual diversity and in particular a willingness to create robust and novel data tests (in a style that characterized so much of Charles Feinstein's own contribution to the discipline) that are generated and tested with care often over the long term rather than the undertaking of more speculative and theoretical research that produces quick although inherently unstable results.<sup>20</sup> I suspect that the unique fusion of economic history in Oxford that brings the discipline together with History and the broadest possible social science community is the best guarantor of future success.

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<sup>20</sup> A list of studies that exemplify such approaches would certainly include: Hans-Joachim Voth, *Time and Work in England 1750-1830* (Oxford, 2000) using an ingeniously constructed data from criminal court records to reconstruct patterns of labour and leisure during the Industrial Revolution, Jane Humphries who employs many hundreds of working class autobiographies in *Childhood and child labour in the British Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge 2010), Sheilagh Ogilvie who painstakingly exploits a mass of church records to quantify the character of female employment in *A Bitter Living: Women, markets and Social Capital in Early Modern Germany* (2003) and Leigh Shaw-Taylor (another product from early years of the Oxford Master's course) who with Tony Wrigley is undertaking a massive project collating information on occupation of individuals (now exceeding 1million in number) whose vital events are recorded in English parish registers thereby fundamentally revising our chronology of secondary employment growth in the early modern English economy. These constitute fine examples of the kind of research to which this comment is addressed.

## **Hans-Joachim Voth**

ICREA Research Professor, Universitat Pompeu Fabra

### **1. Why did you decide to study economic history at Oxford?**

I drifted into it – I came to Oxford in 1991 as a visiting student from Freiburg, where I had studied economics and history. I didn't really know the “Anglo-Saxon” model of economic history, and only came across it for the first time in a review course taught by Charles Feinstein in the fall of that year (where I also met my friend and co-author Tim Leunig).

### **2. Did Oxford provide you with opportunities that you would not have found elsewhere?**

I discovered the field I love; if this would have happened elsewhere is anyone's guess.

### **3. Who were your primary influences while at Oxford?**

There were many – Charles Feinstein, James Foreman-Peck, Avner Offer, Richard Smith, Paul David, Anne Kussmaul, Tony Wrigley. And I had an excellent peer group – Tim Leunig, Liam Brunt, Ed Butchard, to name a few.

### **4. -Did you have much contact with the historians while at Oxford?**

I went to many lectures and classes that took my fancy – who would want to miss John Elliott on Imperial Spain?

### **5. What was the most significant academic work that came out of Oxford while you were there?**

I think Charles Feinstein's revisions of the standard of living qualifies as the most important contribution; it was well underway when I was there.

### **6. What changes did you notice in Oxford while you were there (or since you left)?**

I was in the first cohort of the Master in Economic History. The program was a tremendous boost for the field.

### **7. What are your immediate academic plans?**

I am finishing an ERC project on asset prices and savings behaviour. I have also started to work on how cultures evolve; in particular, I am thinking about the question if cultural change can be engineered, and if so, how. To that end, I am looking at the long-term effects of denazification in Germany.

### **8. What advice would you give to the current economic history students at Oxford?**

I would urge them to look for close ties with economics. The field sometimes has an insular tendency, trying to play its own form of minor league baseball. It is much too important for that; done right, the economics profession likes what we do, it is the intellectually valid strategy, and the grass is much, much greener.

9. What about the future of economic history?

Economic history is “back” in the sense that a lot of people think the past matters and they write a lot of papers. As Nick Crafts says: Economic history has had a “good crisis”. The bad news is that many of the papers using historical data are not written by economic historians – we have had a declining market share in an expanding market. That needs to be addressed; outstanding graduate training – as in Oxford – is helping with that.

10. Where will its home be? Pessimists argue that economic history is increasingly becoming isolated between increasingly intolerant economics departments and history faculties where the ‘cultural revolution’ has turned empiricism into a dirty word.

Good work will always find a home, and the linguistic turn in history departments – in my view – has peaked and is now receding. Economics departments can be hostile, but this will only change if economic history produces outstanding scholars who can speak to mainstream economists with confidence and passion, generating enthusiasm for what we do – in the way that, say, economic historians like Joel Mokyr, Nathan Nunn, and Dora Costa do (and perhaps, if I can be forgiven a moment of fatherly pride – my students Nico Voigtländer, UCLA and Peter Koudijs, Stanford GSB).

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