

Understanding slavery through cliometrics

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Nobel laureate Robert Fogel wrote that history books abound with examples of “either an explicit or implicit statement that need[s] to be measured.” Cliometrics comprises economic theory, mathematics, and statistics, and measures these statements about history. In other words, cliometrics is the study of history using econometrics.

In “[The economics of African American slavery: the cliometrics debate](#),” author Richard Sutch (National Bureau of Economic Research, October 2018) looks at how cliometrics has affected our understanding of slavery. The author examines the history of cliometric research related to slavery in the antebellum South by focusing on past academic literature that advanced cliometrics, specifically a 1958 conference paper by Alfred Conrad and John Meyer and *Time on the cross*, a 1974 book by Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman.

Sutch points out that when Conrad and Meyer wrote their paper (1958), people widely believed that slavery was not profitable by the 1840s. Furthermore, even in the 1950s, some people wanted to portray southern slavery as a noble service that the South provided to the “unintelligent” and “incompetent” Blacks in America. They asserted that slavery had not been in the slaveowners’ economic interests. Instead, they promoted slavery as a service that made Blacks productive workers, kept Blacks “content,” and kept the peace. Conrad and Meyer challenged this view and tested whether or not slavery was profitable. They used data from the antebellum period to create production functions, simulate revenue flows, and calculate rates of return to slavery. By using cliometrics, they proved that slavery was profitable and disproved the long-standing justification for slavery that had been based on racist beliefs.

In the decades following the 1958 paper by Conrad and Meyer, many economists attempted to replicate the findings of these two authors using cliometrics. New data sets were used and different models were built on varying assumptions. All of these studies found that slavery was profitable, which further disproved erroneous views about slavery.

Sutch briefly discusses the new areas of research concerning antebellum slavery to which economists applied cliometrics. Economists examined the interregional trade relationship between the South and the rest of the colonies and its effects on slavery, the interstate slave trade in the South, and the failure of the South to industrialize. Then in the second half of the article, Sutch focuses mostly on *Time on the cross*, by Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman (1974).

Time on the cross generated a lot of controversy for its conclusions. Sutch highlights the irresponsible use of cliometrics by Fogel and Engerman to claim that the lives and the standard of living of slaves were not much different than the lives of free men and women. They also argued that slaveowners used positive incentives to motivate slaves to work and that the slave trade did not separate families. They further contended that the slave labor of plantations was more efficient—because of gang labor (resembling an assembly line) and economies of

scale—than places that used free workers. This book encouraged many other economists to study Fogel and Engerman’s claims in an attempt to replicate their findings. Fogel and Engerman were willing to share their data to be 100-percent transparent regarding their work. Using cliometrics, economists quickly disproved all of the authors’ claims, pointing out many problems with the research methodology and concluding that *Time on the cross* was full of “egregious errors” and had no leg on which to stand.

Although *Time on the cross* was controversial and the research was proven to be of poor quality, Sutch concludes that it had both good and bad effects on the research community. The controversy pulled many economists into the debate on slavery, and they used cliometrics to debunk harmful conclusions. However, because of the many problems just mentioned and the quantitative nature of cliometrics not being well understood by historians, Sutch contends that many historians still do not use cliometrics. Unfortunately, this means that they are not using all the tools needed to more accurately study history.

Sutch’s article is a must read. He states that his purpose is to discuss the impact that cliometrics has had on slavery. However, the article clearly points to a reciprocal relationship between cliometrics and slavery. Slavery was better understood through the use of cliometrics, and cliometrics was refined and improved through the study of slavery.