

Quantifying Culture? A Response to Eric Slafter

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When I first read the phrase “quantitative cultural history,” I was tempted to reach for my revolver—or, perhaps more productively, for my copy of Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1982). For at first glance, this paradoxical moniker seems to channel just that reduction of quality to quantity that the Frankfurt School thinkers, with a little help from their friends Max Weber and Georg Lukács, condemn as reification.¹

For intellectual, institutional, and political reasons that I will elaborate briefly, I remain somewhat skeptical about the “quantitative turn.” But there is no doubt that Eric Slafter’s essay “Revolutions in the Meaning and Study of Politics,” as well as a key chapter of his recent book *The State as a Work of Art* (2009), makes a provocative and often convincing case for the benefit of considering cultural history from a quantitative perspective. Slafter’s essay takes us through three developments in the recent study of early American politics—technological, methodological, and ontological or categorical. In three persuasive movements, he demonstrates the kinds of insights made possible by the digitization of early American texts; draws our attention to the way close consideration of the materiality of the book and its circulation transforms our thinking about politics; and makes a suggestive, if underdeveloped, link between the politicization of everyday life during the American Revolution and in the last decades of humanities scholarship. Slafter further points out that, with the exception of the last point about politicization, these revolutions in early Americanist methodology remain largely absent from later Americanist work. His focus, then, is less explicitly on what early Americanists can offer later Americanists than on how later

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technologies and sensibilities remediate and reconfigure early moments. Still, the richness of these new developments makes it worth reversing the time vector and asking how scholars of the contemporary should respond to this revisionary early work. What is a later Americanist—or, in my case, a later comparatist—to make of these developments and Slafter’s account of them? How can we draw on the insights of our early Americanist colleagues to open up new paths for the understanding of contemporary literature and politics? Here, I want to focus on some preliminary methodological issues that might guide us as we assess the quantitative turn. Developing the quantitative approach sketched by Slafter without falling into the trap of reification will require, I argue, three forms of self-reflexivity: increased theoretical elaboration, consideration of current contexts of textuality, and caution about the institutional climate of humanities research.

In order fully to appreciate the possibilities of the quantitative approach, I would want to know more about its theoretical underpinnings. Consider, for example, a more theoretically elaborated quantitative project—Franco Moretti’s ambitious and controversial attempt to chart world literature through a practice of “distant reading.” Not strictly parallel to the kinds of projects outlined by Slafter, Moretti’s sketch of his approach nevertheless raises critical theoretical and methodological issues that might supplement the discussion begun by Slafter. Moretti’s most significant intervention is to draw attention to the problem of reconceptualizing reading and interpretation in the face of a shift in the level of data. Once we have created new kinds of data—whether through digitalization or through the kind of comparative, canon-opening project Moretti outlines—the problem becomes, in Moretti’s words, not “*what* we should do,” but “*how*” we should do it (54–5). Moretti cites Weber, who pertinently warns, “It is not the ‘actual’ interconnection of ‘things,’ but the *conceptual* interconnection of *problems* which define the scope of the various sciences. A new ‘science’ emerges where a new problem is pursued by a new method” (qtd in Moretti 55). The projects Slafter introduces here are without doubt on their way to the conjunction of novel method and novel problem Weber calls for, yet in Slafter’s own summary sketch, theoretical reflection on the categories and conceptual interconnections at stake remains underdeveloped. If, as Moretti argues following the Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz, “forms are the abstract of specific social relationships” (65), it becomes all the more crucial to be self-reflexive about what forms are chosen for analysis.

Moretti’s “sociological formalism” (66) prompts me to ask about how quantitative cultural history contends with the limits of

what seems to be its favored category of analysis. The quantitative approach sketched here by Slafter and put into practice in his own highly interesting account of religion and secularization in the late eighteenth century seems to focus thus far primarily on the *word* as the unit of analysis. That is, the “manipulation of verbal data” to which he refers often amounts to tracking the frequency of appearance of certain key terms. Slafter is far too nuanced a scholar to claim any transparent significance for his findings on, for example, the fluctuation in the frequency of the word “God” on eighteenth-century title pages, and he always supplements quantitative analysis with a richly informed qualitative approach that employs close reading and contextualization across different media and generic domains. Still, the quantification of the word would seem to risk at least a double reification and thus raises some critical questions that I would address to practitioners.

First, can quantitative cultural historians prevent the massification of word-based data from performing a reduction of the inherent polysemy or aporetic nature of the signifier? I am thinking here of a whole range of now-canonical twentieth-century theoretical interventions, from Freud’s discussion of the inherent contradictoriness of the German word *unheimlich* to Bakhtin’s notion of the unavoidable dialogism of the word—the extent to which the word is never singular—and on to the *pharmakon* in Derrida’s double reading of Plato.² Can we quantify without losing the disruptive detail and splitting significations to which we have learned to attend? Second, can quantitative scholars overcome the isolation of the word from the syntagmatic context of discourse? The focus on the word risks reducing the text to what contemporary jargon calls a “data point.” As a thinker like Adorno would caution through both his theory and practice, the sentence, not to mention larger units of discourse, possesses a potentially dialectical nature that suggests a much more jagged, less static understanding of the social than might a word.³ If forms are abstracts of social relations, then the unit through which we grasp form matters. No doubt techniques exist—or will develop—that make possible less word-centric approaches, yet even “multivariate analysis” of the kind practiced by Slafter seems only to begin to address this concern (256). Like all data, these new forms require in turn theoretical frameworks of interpretation to render them meaningful.

Second, and more briefly: Besides developing theoretical frameworks of interpretation, as all critics must, critics of the contemporary inspired by advances in the history of the book would also need to reflect on the current dynamics of the text, as many critics have been doing. The most significant advances Slafter identifies grow out of the digitization of early American

texts printed in North America and Britain and out of the attention to the production and circulation of the book. Today the book is an endangered—or at least rapidly changing—form and digitization is the starting point, not a future possibility, for many texts. What is a text in this new media environment and what can be said about contemporary forms of circulation that are global and instantaneous, if also still uneven? On the one hand, contemporary critics work “naturally” in a digitized environment; on the other hand, immersion in this environment can lead to a lack of the distance necessary for critical reading—we are all too comfortably at home in the digital. What strategies can critics of the contemporary thus invent to defamiliarize powerful technological framings?

Finally, I would like to pose a question for humanists in general about the institutional context of the quantitative approach. Barely a day goes by when I do not receive an e-mail announcing new opportunities for funding in what is now called the “digital humanities.” Many of my colleagues are taking good advantage of these opportunities, and I am sure that the results will be path-breaking. And yet, given the paucity of funding in the now-“analog” humanities, I worry about the institutional logic of support and neglect. At least at my home institution, humanities that can be rendered commensurable with engineering, computer science, or other hard sciences seem to stand a greater chance of survival than those that remain unplugged. Here, the institutional logic joins the logic of data mining and reveals a deeper problem: an almost tautological fit among technology, methodology, and institutional ideology in which *commensurability* becomes the operative term.⁴ Although all of Slafter’s examples—again, including his own work—provide rich forms of social, cultural, and political insight, I worry about the institutional capture of humanities research programs. Divergent research methodologies do not partake of a zero-sum game—not only can quantitative and qualitative approaches run parallel to each other, they can coexist in the same project, of course. Yet institutional resources more obviously do obey a logic of scarcity: is there a too-easy fit between method and institution? We cannot pretend we are fully in control of the implications of our research. Are we aware of the stakes of buying into models based on quantification and commensurability?

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I am not arguing that technology comes with a built-in—in this case neoliberal—ideology. Technologies—and methods of scholarship—are relatively autonomous from ideological

determination. Yet relative autonomy is precisely that—relative; neither technologies nor the forms of data they make possible ever break entirely free from the force fields of ideology. Slauter's account generally lacks discussion of ideology or, if that word seems too passé, of the discursive networks in which the new scholarship emerges. The powerful computational models and statistical samples of quantitative cultural history may appear as nonideological outcomes of value-free manipulation, but technologies always involve framing and the framing of data provides the background determination of ideologies in their purest form. In other words, I think Slauter needs to tell us more about the politics of politics in his discussion; he provides a hint of this in the concluding paragraph when the politics of the 1960s emerges as one of the driving forces of the new scholarship, but much more needs to be said to link this phenomenon to the emergence of the political in the age of the American Revolution and to draw out its implications for contemporary intellectual practice. The new quantitative cultural history may well be energized by the dual legacies of the democratizing revolutions of the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. At the same time, however, other, less democratic forces are also shaping our scholarship today in ways that remain as yet unclear and could provide the most difficult challenges of the coming century.

Notes

1. See also Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1958), trans. Talcott Parsons; and Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (1971), trans. Rodney Livingstone.
2. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (1953–1974), vol. 17, 217–54; Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1981), trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, 259–422; Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," *Dissemination* (1981), trans. Barbara Johnson, 61–171.
3. On Adorno's dialectical sentences, see Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or the Persistence of the Dialectic* (1990).
4. For a critique of commensurability that remains timely, see Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (1988), trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele. Recent currents in comparative literature stress incommensurability; see, for example, Natalie Melas, *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison* (2007).

Works Cited

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