A Historian's Guide to Computing. By Daniel I. Greenstein (New York, Oxford University Press, 1994) 268 pp. $48.00 cloth $16.95 paper

Authors of methodology textbooks in every discipline face the same choices: What audience should be targeted? How advanced, how technical, how comprehensive, and how closely linked to current technology should the book be? How broad and how deep should discussions of substantive or theoretical literature, problems of research design, or pure techniques be? Since the market for such textbooks among historians is small, and since no group or association in the discipline has

organized a coordinated series of monographs, the options open to authors are limited.

In this literary text-oriented, rhetorically anti–social scientific volume, Greenstein has answered some of these questions differently from other writers. Regression analysis receives one paragraph (128–129); note taking, bibliographies, and e-mail take up twenty-four pages (36–60); and text processing merits forty-one pages (158–199). Readers are assured that computers should not be "tarred with the same brush as the social science historians" (1) and that "most quantitative historical research" relies on mere arithmetic, descriptive univariate statistics, and cross-tabulations or other simple bivariate measures of association (114–115).

Apparently aimed at autodidacts, rather than students enrolled in courses, the book is organized into six chapters. The first chapter, "Myths and Legends," dispels the view, if anyone still holds it, that computers are useful in history only for those possessing highly mathematicized theory, knife-edged hypotheses, advanced programming skills, and a tolerance for endless, mind-numbing data entry. A discussion of mechanizing clerical tasks is followed by chapters on the use of computers to analyze data bases, calculate descriptive statistics, and make systematic sense of written texts. An overview containing sage advice on strategies for collecting and computerizing data and an extensive and useful bibliography complete the work. Greenstein writes clearly and well; the three substantive examples that run through the book hold the reader's interest; and the publisher has commendably allowed him to include 102 tables, charts, and figures, many quite lengthy.

Nonetheless, the book is unsatisfactory for three reasons, two of them inevitable under current conditions. First, having decided to make his volume both introductory and comprehensive, Greenstein cannot provide enough depth or specificity to enable anyone to use a computer actually to *do* anything. Readers may be frustrated when they realize that they have to start over elsewhere, in less accessible works, before they can put into practice what they have seen outlined in principle.

Second, hardware, software, and network developments are so rapid that printed volumes are doomed to almost instant obsolescence, even if, as here, authors usually avoid illustrating their books with examples drawn from particular versions of programs or machines. Thus, Greenstein makes much of using a "multi-table" database system in which each individual or case is linked from one table to another by identification numbers. But with the ever-growing speed of computers and sophistication of database programs, it is quick and easy to enter, browse, or extract data from subsets of a single file or to expand the fields in a file as needed.

Third, in an effort to appeal to mathphobic neophytes, Greenstein belittles the usefulness of any but the simplest statistical techniques and exaggerates the promise of machine-assisted analyses of writings. With

all of this computing power, all of the available statistical packages, and all of the examples of fruitful work in economic, political, and social history that rely on sophisticated statistical techniques, should historians abjure everything more complicated than cross-tabulations? And should we really put much faith in the often-dashed hopes for content analysis?

Although statistical techniques change slowly, and therefore statistics texts do not necessarily go out of date in a few years, computers and available programs mutate rapidly, and guides to them have short shelf lives. The example of so thoughtful and knowledgable a writer as Greenstein suggests that the discipline needs a set of texts at various levels of sophistication and comprehensiveness, produced in more easily amended form—on cassettes or online. The problem is how to get the profession to give the authors of such works their due credit. Otherwise, we will produce helpful, but evanescent books like this one, and the discipline will continue to be a backwater of technology.

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