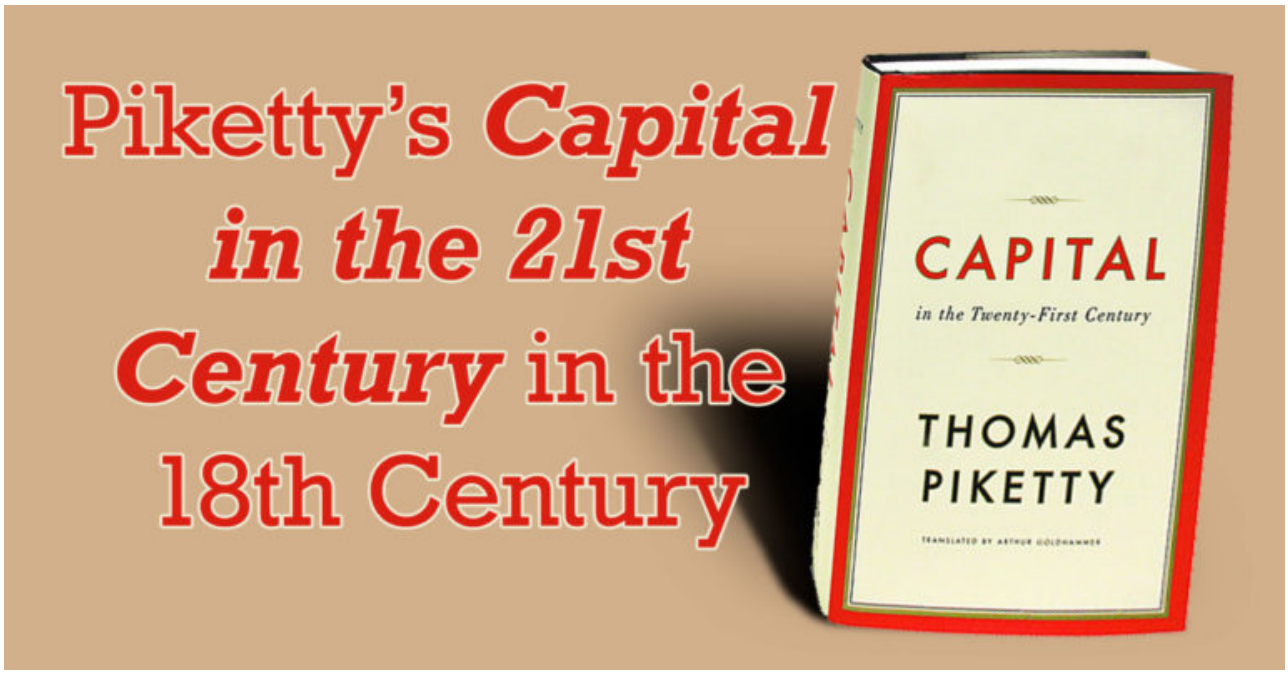
Capital in the Twenty-first Century in the Eighteenth Century; or, Piketty and the Humanities



This forum began at the spring 2015 American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ASECS) conference in Los Angeles, where James Mulholland and I organized a roundtable to discuss what Thomas Piketty's then-bestseller *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* might mean for scholars and students of the eighteenth century working in the humanities. After all, the book's economic history does reach back as far as the 1700s in its effort to understand the present, and Piketty makes frequent and surprising references to novels, especially those by Jane Austen and Honoré Balzac. While a great deal has already been written on the book, the vast majority of that writing has been by economists, and even when political scientists and philosophers have engaged with the book (as in the online seminar at Crooked Timber), questions about Piketty and the humanities still seem underrepresented in the dialogue.

This forum therefore follows up on our roundtable by launching such a conversation. Taken together, the short essays gathered here point out the ways in which numbers and graphs constitute narratives, and insist that data's stories are just as constructed as those found in words and novels. It moreover behooves us to bring the tools of the humanities to interrogate these narratives and the stories they tell in order to understand better how they work on readers (both now and in the past), to identify what they include and exclude, and why. To this end, we hope this forum points toward possibilities for developing a critical business humanities, an endeavor made all the more necessary in a neoliberal age in which the human is increasingly defined in

terms of numbers.

Julia Abramson shows us how an understanding of the knowledge and discourse practices of the French Enlightenment helps us to recognize the larger political project of Piketty's book and its surprising success among the U.S. reading public. For Abramson, Piketty's data is at once a magnet attracting the attention of economists, and a screen that shelters an argument for general readers about social and political forms of justice. Dwight Codr asks where to locate the human and determine its status within the field of political economy that emerged in the eighteenth century. Bringing the novelist Henry Fielding to bear on Piketty's archive and arguments, Codr offers a reverse reading to Abramson's: rather than using numbers to smuggle in an argument on behalf of the human, Codr asks if Piketty uses the tools of the humanities (such as novels) to cloak the inhumanity of economistic understanding. Olivera Jokic turns this dial further to suggest that Piketty treats seventeenth- and eighteenth-century political economists as storytellers rather than proto-scientists. Thinking about Piketty's own data as a narrative, Jokic asks whether there might be a poetics of statistics.

Suvir Kaul interrogates Piketty's curious blindness to the long historical relationship between capitalism and colonialism. While he brings an extended archive of eighteenth-century novels and other texts to bear on Piketty's narrative, Kaul also suggests that this oversight is perhaps less the result of Piketty's limited literary archive than his mode of reading it. Piketty emerges as a financial reader of Jane Austen rather than a materialist one who might recognize the often violent relations of production and exchange beneath the apparent banality of economizing numbers. Piketty may read novels, but he reads them rather like a business major after all. James Mulholland exposes Piketty as both such a reader and writer—a business allegorist who, for example, names economic problems for literary characters—and wonders whether such an approach (one aligned with the field of behavioral economics) is really the humanities at all. Mulholland concludes by turning to the work of digital humanists who have shown—using the very algorithmic tools on which the business world relies—that while Piketty's economic numbers may be unassailable, his literary ones are fundamentally flawed. But Mulholland also raises the question of whether digital humanities marks the ascent of a neoliberal literary studies, or whether it promises an antidote to neoliberalism's increasing encroach on the academy.

We thank the editors of Common-place for hosting this forum, and look forward to discussing with readers the ideas, questions, and possibilities raised by these essays.

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