

HISTORIANS AND WRITTEN SOURCES: GENERAL PROBLEMS

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Introduction: General or trivial problems?

Let me begin with some sort of apology: historical research is a very wide field with an immense variety of themes, all of which depend on sources, most of them written ones. To speak of written sources without reference to a particular subject, therefore, means getting so general that you are in danger of becoming trivial, or at least seeming to do so. Of course, I shall try to avoid real trivialities. On the other hand, it is one of the marks of philosophy that its questions seem trivial at first glance and that problems emerge only when you are prepared to pass beyond this appearance of triviality. I am not a professional philosopher, but any historian who thinks about basic problems of his methods and notions becomes his own philosopher.

In this paper I shall first try to give some very broad definitions concerning the nature and use of written sources. I shall then speak about consequences of these definitions, above all consequences of research on non-European history – so far as I know the problems of this field.

1. Definitions

1.1. Seemingly trivial: Sources and research literature

A first matter requires more thought than it is normally given: we are accustomed to speak of sources on the one hand and literature on the other. In reality, these two terms vary in meaning according to what is being discussed and can be defined only in relation to one another. In this context, literature is to be understood as research literature, that is, any text written with the intention of giving non-falsifiable historical statements. Sources, then, can be defined as anything useful as an empirical basis, as evidence for research literature. This means that literature in a broad sense, even research literature, may also be used as a source, for instance in research on historians of former times. On the other hand, a source is a source only in relation to some research it is used for.

1.2. A classical distinction: Tradition versus remnants

In an academic lecture first given in 1857, Johann Gustav Droysen distinguished between two kinds of information about the past: those that are intended to inform people of later ages and those that are not. In more recent times we have come to call the first type of source (testimony with an eye to posterity) “tradition” and the second (testimony in spite of itself) “remnants” (*Überreste*). “Tradition” in this sense is normally text, whether written or transmitted orally; but artefacts, especially monuments, may also be intended to inform posterity and thus form a branch of tradition. “Remnants” may be objects, for instance old weapons; they may be facts, such as present-day habits that can be assumed to be of long

standing or the present-day distribution of water, desert, mountains and arable soil; but they may also be texts, above all documents of business in the broad sense of this word: political, economic, administrative, etc. The point of the distinction is that in dealing with texts of the "tradition" type it is crucial to become aware of the intentions, assumptions etc. of the author, because they are directed towards readers in later ages and so to ourselves also. This does not mean that "remnants" are not subject to bias: indeed, they frequently are, if they are texts, but this bias is directed towards contemporary readers of the documents in question; normally it can be identified fairly easily from a later point of view. The distinction between "tradition" and "remnants" was chiefly developed by researchers on mediaeval history; the prototype of tradition is a mediaeval chronicle. It must be admitted that there are sources where this distinction, useful though it is elsewhere, does not work too well. I am thinking of texts which are directed equally towards contemporary and future readers, for instance many newspaper articles or travelogues.

1.3. Modern problems: Hermeneutic versus analytical approach

The theory of hermeneutics has at all times been exemplified to a large extent by historical subjects. Accordingly, historical research and historiography were regarded until the 1920s as the major field of the hermeneutic approach: comprehension and reconstruction of the meaning, sense and intentions of human actions in former ages within the framework of the circumstances of those ages were thought to be the main task of the historian. Representatives of German historicism, above all Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), may be regarded as examples of this approach.

The breakthrough of an opposite view came with the French historians Marc Bloch (1886–1944) and Lucien Febvre (1878–1956). They blamed historicism for overrating persons (above all, those in high social and political positions), political facts and political decisions. Instead they pleaded for a history of the anonymous conditions of human life in their interdependence and their long-term change, almost imperceptible when viewed from the perspective of day-to-day events. Research on such "structural history" developed into a school centered around the journal "ANNALES", founded by Bloch and Febvre in 1924.

One reason for the world-wide reputation gained by ANNALES was its contribution to the development of historical method. It soon became obvious that research on structures could not be conducted by asking mainly about motives and intentions, and that the main theme of structural history must be the various conditions under which people lived, especially those conditions of which people at their time were unaware. This meant that the methods of the social sciences had to be adopted on a large scale: facts of little or no significance in themselves had to be extracted from the sources and assembled, compared, combined and treated by all those methods of statistics which are subsumed under the name of analysis. A glance at a volume of "ANNALES" shows the significance of the famous saying attributed to Marc Bloch: "*Il faut compter*" ("We must calculate").

Discussions on the relative merits of the hermeneutic and analytical approaches have at times been lively. In recent years, things have quietened down to a certain extent. It is becoming more and more obvious that these two modes of research are complementary rather than mutually exclusive and that a preference for the one or the other approach must depend on the particular theme chosen.

2. *Consequences*

2.1. Problems of the hermeneutic approach

2.1.1 Bias; inside versus outside view

The everyday problem of historians interpreting textual sources is bias. This is true chiefly (but not exclusively) under the conditions of hermeneutic questions; it applies both to “tradition” and to “remnants”. Bias may be intended by the people who produced the texts, as in official justifications of really dubious political claims; in a few favourable cases, authors openly admit that their works are biased, as for instance did the famous German law scholar Samuel von Pufendorf (1632–1694) with regard to his books on seventeenth-century Swedish and Brandenburg history or Sir Winston Churchill in his quasi-memoirs on the Second World War. More familiar to historians is the opposite case: bias is unintended and even partly or entirely unperceived by people producing documents, because it flows from general political, religious, social ethical and other assumptions which are part of personal identity, largely acquired by education and normally spontaneous.

The bias of textual sources is of interest in two senses with regard to hermeneutic questions: on the one hand, bias distorts truth and therefore ought to be identified in order to be eliminated; on the other, it is an expression of the largely unconscious general assumptions mentioned earlier. These assumptions are the background to the intentions and decisions that need to be understood; so they must not be neglected. From this point of view, bias must be interpreted carefully for its hints at the motives and intentions of people making decisions.

The opportunities for dealing with bias vary according to the availability of sources. In favourable cases, the actions and deliberations of all the participants in a conflict are sufficiently documented to allow us to identify different biases by comparing the documents. This makes possible the reconstruction both of facts and of assumptions and intentions. Good examples are the great peace conferences of Early Modern Europe, such as those of Münster/Osnabrück (1648), Nijmegen (1678) and Utrecht (1713). The unfavourable case is more frequent: the only documents on a conflict to have survived are those of the victorious side. From the Punic Wars to the fate of sects in Reformation Europe or opposition activities in present-day socialist states, examples can be found. Situations in history where the losers are largely (though not entirely) condemned to silence are so numerous that Marxist writers on historical methods tend even to regard history in itself as the history of the victors. A closer look at the sources for African history may show to what extent this is exaggerated. In all the cases mentioned, it is difficult to avoid distortions of truth caused by the partiality of the sources. It is even more difficult to reconstruct the convictions, ideas and intentions of the losers, as their “inside” view is lacking in the documents.

There is an old and much used way of overcoming difficulties of this sort: wherever historians lack sources on the ideas and motives of people acting in history, they try to infer intentions from actions. This is possible only if one makes the general assumption that people behave rationally, so that from what they do may be inferred what they wanted to achieve. Now in reality, human ideas on what is rational, what is worth achieving, and how to achieve it are not constant in history. They interfere with basic assumptions on cultural values. In European history, for instance, the rationality of mediaeval political actions is not easy to

understand from our present view. Comparable, and perhaps even more critical, is the situation of Europeans trying to infer motives from actions in non-European civilisations where basic assumptions and patterns of behaviour are so different. Here again, I am curious to learn from the discussion to what extent this applies to research on African history.

2.1.2 Bias as a problem of decoding

Using communications research is to some extent fashionable. If I follow this fashion, I do so because it seems useful in this special case: problems of dealing with bias become clearer if we describe biased language as a code and try to find a means of decoding it. The main purpose is to reconstruct the "inside view" of the losers, which is latent, coded, but in this indirect form present in the documents of the victors.

One general and necessary precondition for such decoding is a minimum of information where the same message is given in the two codes we wish to compare. A good, though simple example is the famous Rosetta stone, which made it possible to penetrate the whole system of writing and the language of Ancient Egypt. Normally things are more complicated. Frequently changes occur in the code of the victors, allowing historians to decode older messages by comparison with more recent information. My own experience here is in a field rather remote from African studies: the political documents of twentieth-century socialist states are examples of a very rigid, almost hermetic coding of statements along a party line. Changes of this party line, however, bring about condemnations of what was accepted before. This often makes it possible to find a new meaning in documents written before the change, such as hints at an opposition that existed before but only now becomes visible.

Considerable help in decoding can be drawn from even the smallest fragments of the "inside view" of the losers. Let me take the example of pre-Cortez Mexico. There exist sculptures and even a few texts saved by Spanish monks during the *conquista*. These enable us to reconstruct in a very rough manner the religious ideas and practices of the Aztecs. Much of what Cortez and his companions wrote becomes easier to understand if it is compared with these few Indian documents.

A similar result may be brought about by differences among documents of the victors regarding their attitude towards the losing side. "Outside" documents from a relatively sympathetic point of view can be helpful in decoding statements based on a less friendly attitude. This too could be demonstrated by documents of socialist policy, in cases where controversial discussion within the limits of the party line was tolerated or even stimulated: differences in descriptions of the problems discussed hint at the reality hidden behind these descriptions.

2.2. Problems of the analytical approach

2.2.1 Quantitative problems

The basic problem of any analytical procedure is the availability of data: in order to establish logical relationships between facts, these facts must be sufficiently known. If it is impossible or undesirable to examine all the data of a certain context, at least those that are examined must be representative for the whole in the statistical sense. If change in the relationships between data is to be analysed over time, there must be evidence at best for every year, at worst at intervals that are not too large and roughly equal.

Normally in the social sciences, these are not crucial problems, as the data that are required can in principle be obtained by investigations such as questionnaires. Historians are in quite a different situation, as they cannot produce their sources: historical evidence is principally limited by accident and by gaps caused by it.

Historical research directly based on statistical sources is practically limited to the last 200 years: in most parts of Europe statistics did not come into use until the late eighteenth century. This does not mean that the use of statistical sources from the period since 1800 is without difficulties: in many cases, intensive source criticism is required with regard to the terminology and methods of old statistics in order to make sure what was really measured in such documents.

The problems, however, are greater in “pre-statistical” ages, where quantitative research can only be done by arranging into statistical series facts that are documented but were originally not in any statistical context. Population history based on entries concerning baptisms, marriages and funerals in parish registers is a classic example. Business or administration records are important sources for research of this type. Normally, considerable efforts at source criticism are required to make sure that data from such sources are really comparable. Let me give one fairly familiar example. Taxation records offer lots of evidence for economic, social and demographic history. Unfortunately, almost everywhere in pre-industrial Europe, taxation applied not to individuals but to households, “hearths”, families. This immediately raises the question of the average size of a household, a highly problematic question in social and demographic history, particularly with regard to the relative importance of large and small families.

2.2.2 Qualitative problems

The availability of data for statistical analysis is not the only problem of quantitative historical research. The pioneers of structural history hoped that more quantification might make it easier to avoid bias in historical judgement both coming from the sources and from predispositions of the historian himself, rendering history more objective. The actual development of historiography shows that this hope was at the very least exaggerated; we can rather observe a shift from direct to indirect bias.

The first problem in this context is one of source criticism: much care is needed to ensure that data taken from sources really are as neutral and value-free as they are supposed. Let me give an example from research on the French Revolution. Evidence on the structure of French society in those days is distorted partly by the fact that it was recorded by members of the governing classes and reflects their lack of interest in or even latent hostility towards all people below their own rank. The French word *roturier* may mean anyone who is neither a nobleman nor a peasant: it can cover a simple craftsman who lives on the work of his family or a fairly well-to-do manufacturer with a hundred people working for him. This distance, important as it is for modern research, might seem unimportant to a nobleman at the court of Louis XVI.

More important is the problem of bias latent in questions and conceptions of research. We all know the familiar saying that there are three forms of lying: straightforward lies, perjury and statistics. To a certain extent this applies also to the use of statistics in historical argument: results of statistical examination of a problem may differ considerably according to where the limits between the groups of data are drawn, such as how many acres of property are

thought necessary or sufficient to call a man a squire instead of a peasant. Now this is a rather simple example where bias is easily identified. There are more dangerous cases where the questions and terminology even of statistical investigations are distorted by basic assumptions unnoticed by the persons doing the investigation. Let me suppose that this might also be a problem of research on African history because of the cultural differences between European researchers and the situations they deal with. It is evident that until the very recent past, the history of mankind as a whole was regarded mainly from the point of view of the industrial countries, to the detriment of a proper understanding of large sections of human culture.

2.3. Combining the hermeneutic and analytical approaches

Earlier in this paper I suggested that the analytical and hermeneutic approaches are not alternatives but complementary. Let me now try to explain this a little more. As we have seen, the seeming neutrality of statistical arrangements does not exclude the danger of hidden partiality. On the other hand it is obvious that many problems of the past did not come within reach of historical research until after the “discovery” of structures as themes. In my view, this is of particular interest with regard to basic differences between civilisations, such as between those of Europe and those of Africa. Nevertheless, analysis of structures cannot be an aim in itself, as structures themselves are subject to historical change. Reasons for this change can be found not only within internal dynamics of structures but also in the intentional actions of groups and individuals in situations where structural conditions offer comparatively large spectra of possible decisions. I suppose that the meaning of this rather general statement can be demonstrated by persistence as well as change in the socio-cultural structures of Africa under the impact of European expansion. Structures explain the conditions of intentional action; the results of intentional action explain changes in structures.

3. Conclusion: Approaches, not arrival

It seems suitable to close with a few verses from the epilogue of a play by Bertolt Brecht:

Verwundert sehen wir und leicht betroffen
Den Vorhang zu und alle Fragen offen,

which roughly means: “The curtain closed, and all questions remained unanswered.” It was my task rather to point to unresolved problems than to resolve them. I hope that this is not merely a reflection of my own shortcomings but is at least partly due to the basic condition of historical research: that there are infinite opportunities of getting nearer to the truth but no certainty of having reached it — numerous approaches but not arrival.

4. Epilogue: Use and uselessness of this paper

Discussion at the symposium to a certain extent — though not completely — confirmed my fear that I had offered a contribution which had no or at any rate very limited use. To alter my paper along the lines of what I learned at the symposium might produce a completely new article, differing considerably from what I originally wrote. As this does not seem ad-

visible, I prefer to state afterwards what new aspects of my theme the discussions made visible to me. I have changed only those passages of the original text which had proved to be erroneous or open to misunderstanding. I am especially grateful to Humphrey Fisher for indicating such passages.

More interest than I had supposed was aroused by the "classical" distinction of tradition versus remnants. Obviously, this is due to the interrelation of this theme with the question of primary, secondary etc. sources raised by David Henige. A striking similarity between the source problems of African and of mediaeval history can be observed in the important role of genealogies of texts written by authors borrowing from one another and in the necessity of reconstructing archetypes of corrupted texts. Perhaps my role as a "generalist" in source problems might have been played more effectively by a mediaevalist!

Satisfying for me was the response to what I had written on problems of bias, especially on the perspective of winners versus that of losers. Discussion focused on the utility of the distinction between inside and outside sources, which was also used by some other participants. I had the opportunity to learn that there exist various intermediate types between merely internal or purely external sources, as the authors of European texts of all sorts (travel accounts, business records, etc.) had to rely more or less on Africans for the information they wished to use and to pass on. These Africans were normally sufficiently familiar with European languages and civilisation to make themselves understood; on the other hand, they still had sufficient links with their native culture to be able to provide information. Concrete problems of source criticism may be generalised in the question to what extent information was transformed or even corrupted in that process. (What, for example, does a European missionary understand when he is informed by a baptised African about African religious rituals?) There was a broad consensus in the discussion that "internal/external sources" should be regarded as poles on a broad scale of source types, which could be described by their closer affinity to one or other extreme.

Furthermore, the general concept of "external source" calls for concrete analysis of the conditions of genesis of individual sources. European views on African problems differ considerably, depending on the influence of contemporary European situations, on the literary and other traditions and conditions of reception in various European countries, on the interests, socio-cultural and individual predispositions of authors etc.

Finally, I learnt that the problem of a "winners versus losers" perspective may also apply to sources of African origin, e.g. to tradition about West African "jihad".

There was much less discussion about the passages of my paper that dealt with analytical methods of research. For large parts of pre-colonial African history this is probably a problem of lacking sources: the amount of documentation needed to arrange information into series of statistical interpretation is in many cases not present — at least for the time being. On the other hand, it seems necessary to me to ask questions on structural history, even though the material to answer these questions is scarce. I was encouraged in this view by the remarks of Charles Becker on the importance of local and regional traditions for West African history. Research on the structural history of pre-colonial Africa, so far as it can be done at all, will probably need to combine the interpretation of written sources with the use of oral traditions.

Bibliography

In view of the abundance of publications on historiographical theory, it is necessary to be very selective. I have therefore refrained from footnoting individual sentences and prefer giving short notes on the books mentioned.

A valuable survey of modern tendencies in historical research is Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History* (London 1970).

The theme "sources and literature" is evidently so widely regarded as trivial that I have to quote my own *Einführung in das Studium der neueren Geschichte* (Braunschweig, 2nd ed. 1974), pp. 32 f. For the classical definition of "tradition" versus "remnants" see Johann Gustav Droysen, *Historik*, ed. Peter Leyh (Stuttgart 1977). Later discussion is summarised in Ahasver von Brandt, *Werkzeug des Historikers. Eine Einführung in die historischen Hilfswissenschaften*. (9th ed., Stuttgart 1979). "Classical" definition of hermeneutic approach in Droysen, *Historik*. Definition of structural history by Henri Berr and Lucien Febvre: their article "History" in *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (New York 1932). Modern assessment of the "ANNALES" school by Michael Erbe: *Zur neueren französischen Sozialgeschichtsforschung. Die Gruppe um die "ANNALES"* (Darmstadt 1979).

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Source problems of quantification: Konrad Jarausch, ed., *Quantifizierung in der Geschichtswissenschaft. Probleme und Möglichkeiten* (Düsseldorf 1976). For the problem of bias in analytical research, Groh (see above) is valuable.