Source criticism in archaeology and history

"In history, the term historical method was first introduced in a systematic way in the sixteenth century by Jean Bodin in his treatise of source criticism, *Methodus ad facilem historiarium cognitionem* (1566). Characteristically, Bodin's treatise intended to establish the ways by which reliable knowledge of the past could be established by checking sources against one another and by so assessing the reliability of the information conveyed by them, relating them to the interests involved." (Lorenz, 2001, p. 687).

Modern source criticism in history is closely associated with the German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), who influenced historical methods on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, although in rather different ways. American history developed in a more empirist and antiphilosophical way (cf., Novick, 1988).

Two of the best-known rule books from History's childhood are Bernheim (1889) and Langlois & Seignobos (1898). These books provided a seven-step procedure (here quoted from Howell & Prevenier, 2001, p. 70-71):

1. If the sources all agree about an event, historians can consider the event proved.
2. However, majority does not rule; even if most sources relate events in one way, that version will not prevail unless it passes the test of critical textual analysis.
3. The source whose account can be confirmed by reference to outside authorities in some of its parts can be trusted in its entirety if it is impossible similarly to confirm the entire text.
4. When two sources disagree on a particular point, the historian will prefer the source with most "authority" - - i.e. the source created by the expert or by the eyewitness.
5. Eyewitnesses are, in general, to be preferred, especially in circumstances where the ordinary observer could have accurately reported what transpired and, more specifically, when they deal with facts known by most contemporaries.
6. If two independently created sources agree on a matter, the reliability of each is measurably enhanced.
7. When two sources disagree (and there is no other means of evaluation), then historians take the source which seems to accord best with common sense.

Gudmundsson (2007, p. 38) writes: "Source criticism should not totally dominate later courses. Other important perspectives, for example, philosophy of history/view of history, should not suffer by being neglected". This quote makes a distinction between source criticism on the one hand and historical philosophy on the other hand. However, different views of history and different specific theories about the field being studied may have important consequences for how sources are selected, interpreted and used. Feminist scholars may, for example, select sources made by women and may interpret sources from a feminist perspective. Epistemology should thus be considered a part of source criticism. It is in particular related to "tendency analysis".

In archaeology is radiocarbon dating an important technique to establish the age of information sources. Methods of this kind were the ideal when history established itself as both a scientific discipline and as a profession based on "scientific" principles in the last part of the 1880s (although radiocarbon dating is a more recent example of such methods). The empiricist movement in history brought along both "source criticism" as a research method

and also in many countries large scale publishing efforts to make valid editions of "source materials" such as important letters and official documents (e.g. as facsimiles or transcriptions).

Historiography and Historical method include the study of the reliability of the sources used, in terms of, for example, authorship, credibility of the author, and the authenticity or corruption of the text.

Source criticism

You need to decide how far you can trust a source you wish to use in your work. With the help of source critical criteria you can assess if a source is reliable and contains the correct information or is biased and of limited quality.

The web is often viewed as a source that requires extra attention to source criticism but basically documents in electronic form are just as reliable as printed material. Most material on the web is reviewed in the same way as printed books and journals. If you find an article from a particular journal on the web it has the same quality as the printed version.

However, documents that have *not* been reviewed by a publisher, institution or researchers require particular attention. You can make your own source assessment using the following criteria:

Authority – Who is behind the source?

- Can you find information about the author and his/her qualifications?
- Is the source attributed to an institution that you trust?

Objectivity – What is the purpose?

- Does the source aim to sell or inform?
- Does the source provide facts or opinions?
- Does the source contain a one-sided presentation of facts that give a biased view of the subject?
- Does the document come from a false website? Check the web address to see who owns the domain.

Authenticity – What information is presented?

- Are the facts correct? Check the information in an independent source.
- If the source refers to other sources for factual information – go to the primary source to check the facts.
- Are there references to other sources? If not, have other sources been copied? If there are references, are they correct?

Relevance – When was it written?

- Can the factual information be out of date?
- Has the website been recently updated?

SOURCE CRITICISM

Origin   **Who** wrote it/said it/drew it?
When did the person write it/say it/drew it?
Where did the person write it/say it/draw it?
What is the source – a speech/cartoon/textbook/ document?

Purpose   **Why** did the person write it/say it/draw it?
Who did the person write it/say it/draw it **for**?

Content   Is the language objective or does it sound exaggerated or one-sided?
What is the tone of the source?
What information and examples do they select or focus on to support their point?

SOME SOURCES – VALUE/LIMITATIONS

Historians	Value could be	Historians are usually professionals or experts…
		Have the benefit of hindsight which is not present in contemporary sources
		May offer sources based on a range of documents; the more recent the publication, the more sources will be available
	Limitations could be	might have a broad focus to their work or might have a very specific and narrow focus
		Might be an expert in a different region or era from the one they are writing about
		May be influenced by their nationality, experience, politics or context

Cartoons	Value could be	A cartoon can inform public opinion as cartoonists often respond to popularly held views
		can portray the government's line when there is censorship
	Limitations could be	could be censored and not reflect public opinion
		Often play on stereotypes and exaggeration
		Could be limited to the viewpoint and experience of the cartoonist (or the publication the cartoon appears in)
		May have limitations because of tone, use of language and expression

Web pages – what you might consider:

- Who wrote the page?
- What qualifications does the Web page's creator have?
- Who published the page?
- Who's responsible for the Web site?
- Is there any contact information?
- Is the information up to date and complete?
- Is the information presented in a neutral way?
- Is the document well written?
- When was the page published?
- How often is the Web site updated?
- Are there sources or references?

Investigating a website further

- *"Whois"* search services. Who has registered this domain?
- *"Wayback Machine"*, www.archive.org . What is the history of the website?

SHORT OVERVIEW – SOURCE CRITICISM

TWO KINDS OF SOURCES:

Relics (remnants) and narratives

NARRATIVES – FOUR BASIC CRITERIA IN SOURCE CRITICISM

- **ORIGINALITY** – Is the source authentic/genuine?
- **TIME** – The closer to the event the better… (*contemporary* – *non-contemporary* sources)
- **DEPENDENCE** – Is the source reliable? A *primary* (*firsthand*) source is more reliable than a *secondary* (*secondhand*) source which is more reliable than a *tertiary* (*thirdhand*) source and so on…
- **TENDENCY** – Does the source express some kind of bias? Is it emotional, non-neutral, one-sided, or is it more neutral? Exaggerations, general "*tone*", choice of samples, etc… are ways of showing bias

IDENTIFY YOUR SOURCE

Origin – *Who* wrote it / said it / drew it?
When did the person write it / say it / draw it?
Where did the person write it / say it / draw it?
What is the source – a textbook / speech / cartoon / etc…?

Purpose – *Why* did the person write it / say it / draw it?
(EX: information; education; influence; entertain; make money; etc…)
Who did the person write it / say it / draw it *for*?

Different kinds of narrative sources – Historians; Biographers; Private letters; Diaries; Memoirs; Newspapers; TV reports; Radio reports; Eyewitness accounts; Novels; Poems; Statistics; Photographs; Films; Cartoons; Paintings; Government records; Speeches; Memoranda; Laws; etc…