

Theory of Knowledge in History
Sources + Historians = Histories

Introduction

The first way in which we gain knowledge of the past is through historical evidence ("sources"). Two questions raise themselves:

- a. How can we extract knowledge from the sources?
- b. How useful is the knowledge that we extract in this way?

A. How can we extract knowledge from the sources?

Quantity: How complete is the historical record?

- For Medieval historians, one problem is that there *aren't enough* sources.
- For Modern historians, one problem is that there are *too many* sources.
- For all historians, the main problem is that all surviving sources are, by definition, untypical.
- Every historical record is incomplete because important sources have been lost or destroyed:



| Causes of gaps in our knowledge | Examples |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Decay: People, Documents, Artefacts | Medieval women, Emails, TV shows. |
| Destruction - Unintentional | 1666 Fire of London, 1940 Blitz |
| Destruction - Intentional | Shredding of documents, Official Secrets |

Quality: How trustworthy is the historical record?

- Another problem is that the sources which do survive are not only rather unrepresentative and uninformed, but are often deliberately misleading.
- To assess reliability, Historians use the **PACT**:

| | |
|---|--|
| Purpose Why was the source produced? | Author Do we know anything about the person who produced the source? |
| Context Is the evidence backed up by what we know from other sources? | Tone Is the source dry and factual (=reliable) or emotional and opinionated (=unreliable)? |

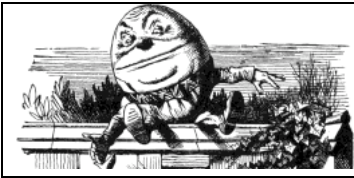
Task 1: Complete this table through class discussion

| Image from the Bayeux Tapestry | Point it illustrates |
|---|----------------------|
|  | Incomplete: |
|  | Untrustworthy: |

You will now watch a short **video clip on the Bayeux Tapestry**¹ which illustrates the importance of reaching valid deductions from the evidence....

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQgeirVZ7pU>

• Clarity: How comprehensible is the historical record? (or "The Humpty Factor")



"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less."
 "The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."
 "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master -- that's all."

- Alice in Wonderland, Chapter 6

Deficiencies in the quality and quantity of the historical record are compounded by the fact that language itself changes over time: not only do new words appear and old ones fall from use, but (more confusingly) surviving words change their meaning.

- This criticism of language itself strikes at the very heart of the historical process: if we cannot even fully understand the words being used, how can we begin to decide how complete and trustworthy they are?
- To take some examples, the current use of words such as "awful", "gay" and "to make love" are very different to how they were used just a few generations ago.
- Other words, such as "democracy" and "socialism" have been interpreted in so many different ways by so many different regimes that they have lost all real meaning.
- The debate as to whether historical sources can ever bring us closer to a "true understanding of the past" can be summarised as follows:

| | | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|---|--|
| "Sources CAN be used to reconstruct the past" | Historicism (late 19thC) | Empiricism (History as a science) "Historical sources can provide an accurate and complete vision of the past". | Leopold <i>von Ranke</i> pioneered a scientific approach to the study of history based on the objective analysis of primary sources. In this way he hoped to show History "as it really was" (<i>als es eigentlich gewesen</i>). |
| "Sources CANNOT be used to reconstruct the past" | Postmodernism (late 20thC) | Philology (History as an art) "Historical sources are too incomplete, biased and incomprehensible to serve any useful purpose". | <i>Foucault</i> argued that because historical sources are biased, incomplete, and language itself has no fixed meaning, the past will always be essentially unknowable. |

Task 2: The Postmodernist Point Illustrated

You will now be shown a short comedy clip about **The Great Train Robbery²** by Peter Cook (one of the greatest masters of wordplay). Whilst watching the sketch, complete this table.

| Word | Meaning of this word according to the interviewer | Meaning of this word according to the interviewee |
|-----------------|---|---|
| Train Robbery | | |
| Responsible | | |
| Appreciate | | |
| Behind | | |
| Pieced together | | |

If there is time at the end of this session, you will watch one more clip from Chris Morris (who, incidentally, was a very good friend of Peter Cook) – "**Good Aids, Bad Aids**"³. What's its point? Another nice use of wordplay is from Stephen Colbert - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dudoan-x2A>

² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkJBLnvLaBI>

³ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_qfgllqp8c