

## Theory of Knowledge in History Sources

### 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**:

<b>Purpose</b> Why was the source produced?	<b>Author</b> Do we know anything about the person who produced the source?
<b>Context</b> Is the evidence backed up by what we know from other sources?	<b>Tone</b> 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
	<p>Incomplete: We don't actually know what happened to Harold. This is the only source which suggests he was shot in the eye. Any other sources making reference to this have got the story from the tapestry itself.</p>
	<p>Untrustworthy: This source shows Harold swearing to support Duke William's claim to the throne in 1064. But we don't know why Harold was in Normandy, and neither do we know if he really made this vow, or why.</p>

You will now watch a short **video clip on the Bayeux Tapestry**.

• 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 <b>CAN</b> be used to reconstruct the past"	<b>Historicism</b> (late 19thC)	<b>Empiricism</b> (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 <b>CANNOT</b> be used to reconstruct the past"	<b>Postmodernism</b> (late 20thC)	<b>Philology</b> (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 Robbery 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		