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IMPROVING SOURCE CRITICISM TO COPE WITH NEW TYPES
OF SOURCES AND OLD ONES BETTER

A REMINDER AND A PARTIAL AGENDA

Paul J. Müller⁺

Many historians take it for granted that one of their major contributions to a social science history would be their art to assess and verify historical evidence. This article raises serious doubts whether this will also be the case for the plethora of administrative case files ("Massenakten"). A pledge for a new social-scientific or contextual source criticism to cope with these sources is made.

I assume from the structure of this conference(o) and especially from the heading of this first session - mass data - that the once heatedly discussed question: whether quantification, has been practically resolved according to the formula: Everytime when it is appropriate the historian should try to be precise, should quantify.

Whether quantification itself can be seen only as the end product of explicit or implicit theorizing or can also be used in a purely inductionist way will not only be dealt with in the later sessions but also in the following arguments that mainly describe the progress achieved and deficits to be overcome within an area of methodological and practical concern that was once - and very often still today - is seen as the area in which historians are especially well advanced: the source criticism. I believe they still are, but their achievements in evaluating sources amenable to quantitative analyses have been far less than proclaimed by historians or ascribed by others.(1)

I. THE PROBLEM

I will be mainly concerned with the state of the art concerning the appraisal of sources that emerged in huge masses since the inception of bookkeeping or record-keeping through organizations in the early modern times, has been further accelerated through the formation of the nation state and almost exploded with the emergence of the welfare state and the task to cope with the social consequences of World Wars I and II within the involved societies: the administrative records or case files. This includes the massive records generated by the ecclesiastical and civil administrations - like parish

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registers or probate records - that have found great attention by historical demography in the past 20 years as well as the files generated by such ongoing welfare programs as e.g. Food Stamps.

What I have deliberately chosen to exclude are data generated by the statistical bureaus as enumerations and censuses. Insofar as their statistical data are again mainly based on administrative records, originally produced for non-statistical purposes, they will be included here too. This definition of administrative records or process-produced data thus excludes far less than one might assume at first glance.

The main thesis I will present and further elaborate is that the process of interaction between the institutionalized procedures for recording facts and events, the actors in these bookkeeping organizations and the objects of recording that creates such administrative records/mass data has been insufficiently conceptualized in the past not to mention the scarce systematic and empirical analyses of these interactions as far as historical sources are concerned. A contextual source criticism is badly needed.

It should be noted immediately that this is in no way a radical reformulation of the problem.(2)

In the past, this interaction of elements crucial for the generating of records has been more or less explicitly or completely stated. Charles Tilly described this as follows:

"What we need ... is a kind of historiography as yet ill developed: the investigation of how organizational conditions themselves affect the character of the documentation produced and available to the historian".(3)

Even earlier, Vernon Dibble rightly formulated:

"Testimony is the work of individuals. Historians have accordingly evolved a psychology and social psychology of documents which guide them in their use of testimony. Social bookkeeping is the work of social systems. But historians have not yet evolved a sociology of documents to guide them in their use of such sources. One does find in the manuals a few stray reminders that documents of this type must be read in the light of the social system which produces them".(4)

Surprisingly, even Ernst Bernheim in his "Lehrbuch der Historischen Methode" had in the early editions a word included about administrative records (that was deleted in subsequent editions):

"We have with the administrative records (den geschäftlichen Akten) in any case immediate and infallible evidence of that what those who wrote these records wanted their publics to be known about the events, conditions, and motives or what they themselves knew. But we can never assume without any further examination, that we have with these records infallible evidence of the events, conditions, and motives as such".(5)

He did, however, not provide for any criteria to further examine the representational nature of administrative records.

II. THE STATE OF ART

As it is true for other social sciences the ups and downs of so-called pressing questions is steering the attention of the disciplines much more than the interest in basic research, research that intends to improve the overall methodological strength of a discipline. Therefore, it is not surprising to find methodological achievements especially in the areas of economic and political history as well as historical demography. It seems also be correlated with the emergence of a social-scientific history that tends to be more rigorous in assessing the indicator quality of sources. All these fields of interest were so far primarily concerned with total populations - at least in principle - although in fact they only seldom can rely on preserved nationwide data sources. This in turn explains the predominance of methodological research into problems of undercoverage (of segments of the whole population), into problems of inferring individual behavior from aggregate data (the ecological fallacy) when only aggregates have been preserved, and into problems that emerge because of a lack of correspondence between the frames of official bookkeeping and the social organization of actual behavior (boundary problems). (6)

The legitimacy of such a concentration on these methodological problems seems to be rested in the fact that the most commonly used sources for these research fields are much less deflected by either the motives of those recorded nor those of the people that had to register them as objects. Very often it were censuses which had been much more controlled as far as recording procedures are concerned. Although such records as parish registers were originally established to meet a demand for social control (who is legitimately and for ever married?) by ecclesiastical and later on civil administrations (who should be allowed to marry and to settle in the community?), the motives of the registering personnel and the tendencies to evade registration seem rather negligible, due to either the fact of sheer socialization into continuous population registration or due to an interaction of social control by recording organizations with the social control exerted by the fellow citizens. Seen from today's perspectives these administrative functions are perceived as overwhelmingly uncontroversial in those countries which have a long tradition of continuous registration. Consequently, biases in representing those which were supposed to be registered, have been tried to identify as either a consequence of the character of the recording machinery itself or as a consequence of a low visibility of certain population segments for the recording agencies.

Other sources used for historical demography have proven to be much more influenced by the compound effects of recording procedures, the actual behavior of those responsible to record, and those supposed to be registered. Probate records shall serve as demonstration only. Whereas the single effects of institutionalized recording procedures and the particularities of the recording personnel has already been described in some recent uses made of them, more uncertainty prevails concerning the effect of the behavior of those

registered on the content of the sources. If certain population groups were forced to consume assets and durable goods during the period of their life, inventories taken at the time of the death do not indicate wealth, but instead the degree and success of planning of consumption over the period of life expectation.(7)

Whereas in the last example the effects of the behavior of those registered/recorded had a decisive influence on the content of probate records, crime statistics based on arrests or other action taken by the police are probably the most widely known examples of the predominant influence of reporting procedures and motives of the recording personnel on source content.(8)

The examples provided for mere illustration can of course not proof an argument. Consequently, a systematic review of historical and contemporary research using such sources was done(9) and in fact revealed a predominance of statements like the following in historical research:

"Without further examination of the recording procedures, no ...",
"The Work is based on ..., which are the most reliable sources since they are less linked with taxation",
"We cannot be certain whether ... these findings reflect the orientation of the recording personnel or the attitudes of those recorded".

There prevails an overall uncertainty in conceptualizing the social processes that generate the sources as well as in providing estimates of the magnitude of single or combined effects on source content.

There are a few noteworthy exemptions to the general description however. Alan McFarlane's book "Reconstructing historical communities"(10) provides a good starting point for further evaluation of some of the most widely used administrative records within historical demography and social history. Other scholars have also contributed most valuable single analyses of the institutionalized recording procedures although they often seemed not to know how to systematically present their results.(11) Quite often still, the impression emerges that the historians regard the knowledge gained through practical work with administrative records not worthwhile to report for others or possibly perceive it as a kind of initiation fee into the historical profession to duplicate errors already known individually, which must have disastrous effects on the cumulation of knowledge.

By and large the situation as far as historical research is concerned is still precisely described by a statement of Charles Tilly:

"Every working historian, indeed, has an acute practical sense of the organizational bias of his sources. Many of the finest fine points of the historian's craft are means of using or circumventing that bias. The odd thing is that the enormous lore of historians concerning the conditions of production and retention of documents has never been codified. It may take sociologists, eager to analyze so characteristic a feature of an organization as the pattern of paperwork, to do the job of systematization".(12)

Indeed, sociologists, especially those working in such areas which are themselves defined primarily by the activities of record-keeping organizations such as sociology of law, social control, social problems, education, and complex organizations, have provided for useful concepts and even theories that could be used to organize the vast details known to historians. (13) There are good chances for history to even enlarge its current borrowing of concepts from other social sciences and make them fruitful for their own purposes. Insofar quantitative history is pursued as a social science history the understanding of sources as generated by social processes is already immanent.

III. AN AGENDA FOR FUTURE WORK

Instead of trying to explain a rather complicated scheme for the organization of information that is relevant for a contextual source criticism I will give you just three examples of what social scientific or contextual source criticism might offer as explanations. The following single relationships between the three elements mentioned - the institutionalized procedures, the behavior of recorders, and that of those supposed to be recorded - have been proposed as being applicable to a wide range of different organizational settings.

1. If many organizations are hierarchically involved in the process of data production the greater the importance of legal or formalized perceptions to be found in the sources.
2. The more important the information collected are for the decision programs of those not responsible to collect but to decide on available data, the more carefully are these informations collected in terms of the perceived interest of the deciders.
3. High bureaucratic competence of the clients combined with a low perceived degree of intervention into the organization of everyday life through the bookkeeping itself leads to a recording of that what the organizations intend to measure.

To recapitulate, these selected hypotheses stem from research that is as yet underdeveloped as far as comparisons across types of organizations and across time are concerned. (14)

A more systematic proliferation of descriptions as provided e.g. in Alan McFarlane's and other's books (15) in the future would help to develop more refined but still general sentences about the interaction of relevant factors in the source production process.

As a first step into this direction we are developing within the Center for Historical Social Research a set of questions that should guide the historians in standardized reporting within their publications about the sources analyzed all those elements that are believed to have a bearing on source content.

We do not yet know how far this procedure will take us, although we do not expect to be ever able to predict or deduce source content from "any general theory of record creation" notwithstanding the problem of preservation as Murray G. Murphey already speculated. (16) Nevertheless, the catalogue of background information is hoped to

provide for a much deeper understanding of the nature of administrative data and the kind of questions which can be posed to such data sources.

In addition to these efforts that could easily be copied internationally, the development of data or source handbooks originally intended already by the AHA Committee on Quantitative Data(17) has to be further encouraged. But a modification of the original concept would be wise. Descriptions of quantitative or quantifiable data should also be organized according to functions of source production. Furthermore, we need inventories of the growth and institutional differentiation of recordkeeping organizations as well as of the growth and specialization of functions that were connected with organized bookkeeping.

IV. PRESERVATION POLICIES

Let me finish with a few remarks that are strictu sensu beyond the central point of my argument, but were already evoked by some of the earlier statements and that have a great bearing on the chances to systematically develop a contextual source criticism: the preservation policies of the archives.

For a long time public archives were rather undecided in practice whether to preserve administrative mass data. Nowadays, this general question seems to be resolved in principle in favour for a preservation although many practical obstacles exist for a continuous preservation activity. But the details - e.g. what samples of what kind should be drawn for preservation purposes - are much less clear and liable to national specific solutions.(18) It would be overly optimistic to expect the development of some common rules without the pressure exerted by the user communities.

FOOTNOTES

- o Paper prepared for oral presentation at the conference "An International Assessment of Quantitative History", Washington, D.C., Wilson Center, March 4-5, 1982.
- 1 See e.g. Hobsbawm, E.J., The Contribution of History to Social Science, in: International Social Science Journal, Vol. 33, No. 4, 1981, pp. 624 ff.
- 2 Similar formulations of the problem - albeit far less acute - have been provided by e.g.
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- 3 Tilly, Charles, Quantification in History as seen from France, op cit., p. 110.
 - 4 Dibble, Vernon K., Four Types, op. cit., p. 203.
 - 5 Bernheim, Ernst, *Lehrbuch der Historischen Methode*, 4th edition, 1903, p. 438.
 - 6 A survey of the most important methodological contributions to these topics published within two journals only: the *Historical Methods* (Newsletter) and *Social Science History* until 1981 yielded the following major contributions:
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- 8 See e.g. the article by Monkkonen cited in Footnote 6 as well as the works by Wheeler and Kitsuse/Cicourel cited in Footnote 2.
- 9 Bick, Wolfgang, Müller, Paul J., Probleme der Nutzung prozeßproduzierter Daten, Bundesministerium für Forschung und Technologie, Schriftenreihe Information und Dokumentation, 82-001, Eggenstein-Leopoldshafen, 1982.
- 10 Cambridge University Press 1977.
- 11 See e.g. the articles cited in Footnote 6.
- 12 Tilly, Charles, Clio and Minerva, op.cit. p. 441.
- 13 See Footnote 9, Bick and Müller, The Nature of Process-Produced Data, op.cit., and Cropp, Michael M., Mann, Reinhard, Auswahlbibliographie zur Anwendung und Bewertung von Akten und Dokumenten als Datenquellen in der historisch-sozialwissenschaftlichen Forschung, Köln: Institut für angewandte Sozialforschung, Juni 1981
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- 15 cp. op.cit.; Pitz, Ernst, Entstehung und Umfang Statistischer Quellen in der vorindustriellen Zeit, in: Historische Zeitschrift, 233. Band, 1976, pp. 1-39; Galenson, David W., "Middling People" or "Common Sort"?: The Social Origins of some Early Americans Reexamined, in: William and Mary Quarterly, Vol. 35, No. 3, 1978, pp. 499-524; Mildred Campbell's Response, same issue, pp. 525-540; Galenson, David W., The Social Origins of some Early Americans: Rejoinder, in: William and Mary Quarterly, Vol. 36, No. 2, 1979, pp. 264-277; Reply by Mildred Campbell, same issue, pp. 277-286.
- 16 Murphey, Murray G., op.cit., p. 144.
- 17 Lorwin and Price, op.cit.
- 18 See e.g. Hull, Felix, The Use of Sampling Techniques in the Retention of Records, Paris: UNESCO, RAMP, PGI-81/WS/26, 1981.