

HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE
IN QUEST OF THEORY, METHOD AND EVIDENCE

edited by
Susanna Fellman and Marjatta Rahikainen

CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS

P U B L I S H I N G

Historical Knowledge: In Quest of Theory, Method and Evidence
Edited by Susanna Fellman and Marjatta Rahikainen

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PREFACE

It has been a privilege to act as editors of this book. We were happy that the three distinguished historians, Professors Natalie Zemon Davis, Carlo Ginzburg, and Giovanni Levi, agreed to contribute to the book, and that our three Nordic colleagues, Professors Risto Alapuro, Janken Myrdal, and Matti Peltonen, joined the club. We were impressed when we first read the six contributions, and when we then sat down and worked on our own opening chapter, on the basis of these texts, we had the feeling that we were constantly learning something new. We hope that readers of this book will experience the same pleasant sense of learning something new just as we did, in our capacity as editors, in encountering these texts for the first time.

Why we decided to make evidence one theme of the book has to do with the fact that, together with Risto Alapuro and Matti Peltonen, we editors were located in the Faculty of Social Sciences. Unlike those who study history in the Faculty of Arts and learn to take the distinction between primary and secondary sources for granted, our students often asked why they were required to use “primary sources” in their theses, when no such requirement was placed on their fellow-students of sociology, economics, and political science. This has taught us that for all the talk of rapprochement between the disciplines, history remains distinct in terms of requirements placed on evidence.

Thus, the goal of this book is to serve as an introduction and guide to these themes not only for students and scholars of history, but also for anyone outside the field with an interest in the topic. We aimed at a book which approaches the topic in depth and from various angles, but at the same time we aimed at something that would be easily accessible.

The insight that the historian’s right to the evidence must be defended – paraphrasing Foucault’s *Society Must Be Defended* – came with Richard Strauss’s final opera *Capriccio* (which premiered in München in 1942), which

Marjatta happened to see as an HD live performance of the Metropolitan Opera at the time we were working on the opening chapter. In this opera, after hearing the mocking comments of the young talents at the Countess's birthday party, La Roche, the director of the theater, defends in a disarming way his faith in the theater.

Our acknowledgements go first of all to the six contributors of this book. We wish to thank them for their fine contributions, for their kind cooperation, and for what we learned from them. We also feel indebted to our fellow scholars, past and present, home and abroad, without whose efforts books like this would not materialize at all.

Our warmest thanks to Lisa Muszynski for her professional and knowledgeable revision of the different versions of the English language she encountered in this project.

We wish to dedicate this book, on behalf of all, to our colleague Professor Matti Peltonen, who turns sixty in April 2012, and who introduced both microhistory and the history of mentalities to Finnish historians, throwing open the windows and doors to the wider world.

Helsinki and Gothenburg, September 2011

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INTRODUCTION

Marjatta Rahikainen and Susanna Fellman

The intensive debate about the character of historical research and the possibility vs. impossibility of historical knowledge has now been raging for several decades, and it is time to move on. What did historians gain from it? Certainly historians are today more self-reflective and more theoretically and methodologically conscious than they were before the linguistic turn and the postmodern challenge. But it is one thing to pursue philosophical and theoretical discourse on history writing, and quite another to make it part of research work in practice.

The overall theme of the book, the possibility of historical knowledge, reflects the very issue that makes historical research distinctive: the challenges of evidence and the problems, both concrete and conceptual, with deciphering and interpreting remnants of the past. All disciplines have their explicit and implicit ideas of valid evidence and reasoning, and in this respect history as a discipline has today much in common with social sciences and other humanistic disciplines. Yet only in history is the distinction between primary and secondary sources crucial. Each generation addresses new questions, but only those writing history look for evidence in archives in order to find answers.

Requirements placed on evidence and primary sources used to occupy much space in books on methodological and theoretical issues in historical research, but the whole issue was reduced to a marginal position after the murderous postmodern critique. Thus sources and source criticism have in the last few decades been overshadowed by more fashionable topics of discussion. Nonetheless, the issue of sources and source criticism, trendy or not, has in practice undergone a profound change during the last few decades in the factual research work undertaken by historians.

Moreover, we think that today a historian's right to proper evidence must be defended.

There are factors internal and external to the community of historians that threaten to make proper evidence rare or a luxury that only few historians can afford. Factors internal to the community of historians are associated with the linguistic turn and the postmodern challenge which did not care much about sources and proper evidence. Accordingly, some historians reasoned that sources can be used indiscriminately, as one source is just as good as any other, and all source criticism is pointless. In this book we wish to emphasize the value of proper evidence, primary sources and source criticism in historical research.

Factors external to the community of historians that threaten to make proper evidence a luxury are many. History is a slow science, and archival work takes time, but gone are the days when historians could plunge for years into the archives. Today professors of history can use for research work the time that is left over after all other commitments, at best they have a research leave for a year or two. Researchers not enjoying tenure are under pressure to publish rapidly enough in order to get funding for the next project. Nor is there much time for archival work for PhD students in history who must produce their dissertations in four years. Professors, researchers and postgraduate students are all under pressure to have something to show. Time spent in archives under such conditions feels like a bonus.

In the early 1960s Thomas Kuhn could still write of "the unparalleled insulation of mature scientific communities from the demands of the laity and of everyday life ... professional communities in which individual creative work is so exclusively addressed to and evaluated by other members of the profession."¹ Today virtually everything that a historian wishes to publish is subject not only to peer review but also to an evaluation of its commercial potential: will the proposed anthology or monograph sell well enough? Will the submitted article manuscript help the journal to keep its niche in the market?

If you take in your hand an old published French or German doctoral dissertation, its research question appears conditioned by the publishing time, whereas the wonderfully detailed appendices (in volume two or three) are a real treasure: there you find data about the phenomenon that interests you here and now. But present-day publishers do not like pages filled with detailed data. Nor are scholars and students outside the field of history

1. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 163.

used to reading such extensive monographs. So appendices, the outcome of tedious archival work, the evidence, will not be available for future historians – for their needs the Internet is too ephemeral. For historians, the most endangered species today is the evidence.

In this book six professors of history and historical sociology discuss historical research on the basis of their experiences. Matti Peltonen analyses, with Marc Bloch as one cornerstone and Carlo Ginzburg's method of clues as another, the debate over theory and methodology in historical research, preceding the breakthrough of new openings around the 1970s. Natalie Zemon Davis recalls what her experiences during her quest for Martin Guerre taught her as a historian and reflects on the relationship between archival losses and the nature of the case under study. Carlo Ginzburg discusses, in a self-reflective air, the issue of the historian as an observer of persons under study and suggests that historians should be sensitive to the distinction between the two levels. Giovanni Levi maintains that microhistory aims at reconstructing the complex and incoherent nature of the past and therefore strives to narrate without hiding the rules of the game that the historian has followed. Risto Alapuro approaches microhistory from the perspective of comparative research strategies in social sciences, and after analyzing examples of comparative studies identifies three salient aspects that offer good starting points for any comparative studies. Janken Myrdal builds on his experiences as a medievalist to elaborate a solid research method that aims at making the best possible use of hopelessly fragmented, obscure and scanty sources of whatever period.

In the opening chapter below, the editors build on the contributions of the six professors to discuss from a present-day perspective the changes that have taken place in historical research after the mid-twentieth century, and what characterizes the field today. But they also reflect upon the conditions, intellectual and practical, under which historical research is pursued today.

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CHAPTER ONE

ON HISTORICAL WRITING AND EVIDENCE

Marjatta Rahikainen and Susanna Fellman

1.

Scholarly fashions come and go, and few things appear as outdated as yesterday's fashion. A modifier that yesterday indicated high praise may today indicate the worst censure offered by an updated scholarly lexis. Yet we know from the history of humanistic disciplines and social sciences that any idea and line of reasoning may rise from the dead – it is just a matter of time. One day somebody will read it all with new eyes in new contexts, and there it is again, no doubt modified in one way or another, but recognizable nonetheless.

In hindsight new scholarly fashions appear less haphazard than they may have appeared to contemporaries. Rather, new scholarly fashions seem to spring up in clusters, and this tempts one into seeing them as patterned in some way. In the 1960s and 1970s new scholarly schools sprang up just about everywhere in Western academic communities. This may have had something to do with the fact that the new generation of academic scholars was more heterogeneous in its composition than its predecessors – in itself a sign of how Western societies and the world had changed during the post-war decades.

In many fields of history and its neighboring sciences, as also in social sciences, a new generation of scholars strongly felt that what they were interested in and how they wanted to pursue their research work indicated a fundamental break with the ideas and practices of the then hegemonic academic schools. Those who challenged the old schools of their respective disciplines liked to call their own undertakings New something: New Archaeology, New Economic History, New History, New Social History, New Cultural History, New whatever. After establishing their own publica-

tions, a few of these “New” began to take shape into the form of new schools, with their own university chairs and academic programs.

From this perspective, Thomas S. Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, first published in 1962, came just in time. “Progress through Revolutions,” as the title of the book’s concluding chapter ran, certainly appealed to many persons in contemporary Western academic communities, although in the chapter Kuhn himself modified and next to questioned the usefulness of the phrase scientific progress.¹ If Kuhn’s book could not quite be read as an instruction manual for a scientific revolution, at least it served to justify emerging new paradigms. The relativist element in Kuhn’s paradigm shifts inspired others to go further in the same direction, as did Paul Feyerabend in his *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchist Theory of Knowledge*, first published in 1976.

Today we can make up an interim balance sheet. Newness is by definition a perishable good, so what was the fate of all the “New” of the 1960s and 1970s? In the field of history, some fell out of fashion in their intellectual place of origin but found a home elsewhere. In the 1960s and early 1970s, a number of French historians of the *Annales* school, perhaps inspired by the success of the quantitative sociology of that time, expected a similar success for what they called quantitative or serial history² – vestiges of this stage still survive in new editions of books originating from that period.³ Although future historical research took another road, graphs over long-term changes and trends have well served family history with stress on demography,⁴ and are today an essential part of mainstream economic history,⁵ the heir of the New Economic History.

Some new and marginal fields of study of the 1960s and early 1970s, such as women’s history and history of minorities, sexual or other, are today established parts of the programs of every up-to-date Western department of history. Some of the “New” of the 1960s and 1970s developed into new he-

1. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 159–172.

2. Furet, “Quantitative methods in history”.

3. As in, e.g., Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, first published in English in 1972 (French original *L’archéologie du savoir*, 1969), and in Burke’s *Sociology and History*, 1980, and its revised second edition *History and Social Theory*, first published in 1992, revised edition 2005.

4. E.g., Wall et al., eds. *Family Forms in Historic Europe*; Wall et al., eds. *Family History Revisited: Comparative Perspectives*.

5. As in, e.g., van Zanden, *The Long Road to the Industrial Revolution: The European Economy in a Global Perspective, 1000–1800*.

gemonic schools that are now challenged. Criticism against the mainstream economic history has grown, and the New Economic History now appears just one among an increasingly fragmented field with many openings pointing in new directions. Nonetheless, with its demands for theoretical and methodological rigor, the New Economic History did have an impact on the field in general.

With the benefit of hindsight we may now remark that the scholarly communities of historians who in the 1960s and early 1970s so eagerly looked forward to the New, nonetheless failed to see what expected them just around the corner: two interrelated intellectual phenomena that we today know as the linguistic turn and the postmodern challenge. Hayden White's *Metahistory* was first published in 1973, his *Tropics of Discourse* in 1978, and Jean-François Lyotard's *La condition postmoderne* in 1979 (English translation *The Postmodern Condition* in 1984). Together with the works of Michael Foucault – whose intellectual profile was profoundly different – they made a set to which every up-to-date historian and social scientist then had to take sides, for or against.

The linguistic turn and the postmodern challenge included an argument according to which historical research is nothing but a literary device, pure fiction, and that approaching the past is, by definition, impossible. This would then spell the end of history as a scholarly discipline. Lyotard's claim of the collapse of meta-narrative, or of the grand narrative, was at first understood to indicate “the end of history,” or, as Georg G. Iggers formulated it in 1993, “that there is no longer the possibility of a grand narrative that gives history coherence and meaning.”⁶ It is a kind of irony of history that the postmodern verdict on history as literature echoed time-honored reflections on history as literature vs. science: in fourteenth-century Maghreb, Ibn Khaldûn dwelled on this issue on the first pages of his *Muqaddimah*,⁷ and it is possible that Psellus in eleventh-century Byzantium had reflected on it when writing his *Chronographia*.⁸

In the field of economic history, the quest for theoretical and methodological rigor made the question of proper evidence, if not totally absent, at

6. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century*, 141.

7. Khaldûn, *Muqaddimah*, 6–15. In the modern translation, the first sentence of the Introduction runs: “It should be known that history is a discipline that has a great number of (different) approaches.” (*ibid.*, 15). Ibn Khaldûn's standpoint is discussed in, e.g., Lacoste, *Ibn Khaldun: The Birth of History and The Past of the Third World*, 159–171.

8. Gadolin, *A Theory of History and Society*, 17.

least of minor interest. A similar trend emerged within business history.⁹ This development made economic history less of a history in which economic phenomena, put into a broad context, are investigated in a long-run perspective by means of cogent and extensive empirical evidence. So what had made the discipline interesting to outsiders in the 1960s and 1970s was what economic historians now wanted to get rid of – they threw the baby out with the bathwater.¹⁰ According to Jürgen Kocka, the shrinking interest in economic history and its results outside the field itself has partly to do with the eagerness of making economic history more like economics, while neglecting its roots in history.¹¹

Facing the postmodern verdict, many historians reacted by vehemently defending the scientific character of their discipline. One strategy was to emphasize inter- and intra-disciplinary rules for valid reasoning and for accurate sources and source criticism, and the requirement to base arguments on legitimate evidence was presented as proof of this.¹² Another was to formulate a more solid methodological basis for a redefined socio-historical science.¹³ A second way of reacting to the postmodern challenge was to go along with the linguistic turn, at least as long as its novel charm lasted, or to meet it halfway by changing over to semiotics and cultural studies and adopting a discursive approach.¹⁴ A third way of reacting was to rise to the challenge and to learn what there was to be learned without renouncing the historian's craft.¹⁵ This is the standpoint of the present book.

9. Contrary to economic history, where the discussion in principle has been about its relation to neoclassical economics, the heated discussion among business historians has run between those who argue for a move towards economics and those who proclaim the fruitfulness of management and organization studies. There is a debate about the position of business history in relation to economic history.
10. G. Jones and Khanna, "Bringing history (back) into international business".
11. Kocka, "History, the social sciences and potentials for cooperation: With particular interest in economic history".
12. E.g., Meier and Rüsen, eds. *Historische Methode*; Bédarida, ed. *The Social Responsibility of the Historian*.
13. E.g., Lloyd, *The Structures of History*.
14. E.g., Jacobitti, ed. *Composing Useful Pasts: History as Contemporary Politics*; Sewell Jr., *Logics of History*.
15. For the discussion, see Davis, "The Shapes of Social History"; Mandelbrote, "History, Narrative and Time"; Peltonen, "After the Linguistic Turn? Hayden White's Topology and History Theory in the 1990s".

2.

During the same decades as the heated debate went on in theoretically oriented publications, in practice a shift of the history school took place without much ado. This shift is readily perceived if you compare works of the old school with those of current schools. They may both appear as narratives, yet they differ in terms of the way the story is told and the position of the teller. The old school strove for a coherent plot narrated by an impersonal teller, while current schools strive for a consistent line of argumentation elaborated by an identifiable author.

In works of the old school that embody the ideas of historicism, the narrative follows, in so far as possible, a chronology of events, once considered, as Matti Peltonen remarks in Chapter Two below, as a sign of scientific historical writing. This requirement was, indeed, observed by the most rigorous adherents of historicism. In the early twentieth century this was the case, for example, in the two authoritative series *The Political History of England in Twelve Volumes* and *A History of England in Seven Volumes*. Charles W.C. Oman, the latter series editor, managed to narrate several centuries of English history in a strictly chronological order – as any reader can easily notice, since the year or years whose events are dealt with in the page concerned are printed in the header of the page.¹⁶

In 1939, Charles Oman defined history as “a series of happenings,” and as “the investigation of evidence ... about series of events.”¹⁷ At that time even such an original historian as Marc Bloch felt the tyranny of the chronological order. In his *La société féodale* (1939) he assented to give an excuse for why in the volume “no strictly chronological division has seemed possible.”¹⁸ In what followed, Bloch deliberately disclaimed conventions of the mainstream historical writing of the time by drawing parallels between medieval times, later periods, and his own time and by suggesting points of reference from his own time.

When Fernand Braudel wrote critically about the “histoire événementielle” in *La Méditerranée* in 1949 and again in his *Annales* article about the *longue durée* in 1958, perhaps he had in mind a history of events narrated as in

16. Oman, *England Before the Roman Conquest: A History of England in Seven Volumes*, Vol. I.

17. Oman, *On the Writing of History*, 7, 8, 32.

18. Bloch, *Feudal Society*, xxi; “ – sans qu’entre elles une séparation strictement chronologique ait paru possible – ...” Bloch, *La société féodale*, 7.

the two series of English history¹⁹ – indeed, he equated traditional history and the history of events²⁰ – rather than works that Peter Burke refers to when commenting on Braudel's statement. The historical narrative whose comeback included George Duby's *Le Dimanche de Bouvines* (1973) and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Le carnaval de Romans* (1979) – the two works of *Annales* historians referred to by Burke²¹ – was very different from the historical narrative of the old school.

Present-day historians depart from chronology in favor of thematic discussion, or as the nature of sources, their subject matter and argumentative reasoning requires – in other words, functionally rather than freely as novelists.²² At present, narrating events in a strictly chronological order would not even qualify as serious historical research.

In the late 1940s, Philippe Ariès, a reader of the *Annales* journal and an admirer of Bloch's *La société féodale*, explicitly dissociated himself from the positivist doctrine of the time:

The historian belongs to his age: it is his strength and not his weakness. Therefore he cannot assert his being objective without mutilating himself. He only has to be honest, what is not the same thing.²³

19. Oman's *A History of England in Seven Volumes, Vol. I* enjoyed several reprints and new editions precisely at the time when Braudel was a young university student and teacher of history.

20. "Thus, there is among some of us, as historians, a lively distrust of traditional history, the history of events – a label that tends to become confused, rather inexact, with political history ... almost always political history centered on the drama of 'great events,' has worked on and in the short time span." Braudel, *On History*, 28; "D'où chez certains d'entre nous, historiens, une méfiance vive à l'égard d'une histoire traditionnelle, dite événementielle, l'étiquette se confondant avec celle d'histoire politique, non sans quelque inexactitude: ... presque toujours politique, centrée sur le drame des « grands événements » a travaillé d'as et sur le temps court." Braudel, "Histoire et Sciences sociales: La longue durée", 728–729.

21. Burke, "History of Events and the Revival of Narrative", 283–284. For a more extensive discussion, see, e.g., Carrard, *Poetics of the New History*.

22. Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction*, 110–117.

23. "L'historien appartient à son temps: c'est sa force et non pas sa faiblesse. Aussi ne peut-il s'affirmer objectif sans se mutiler. Qu'il lui suffise d'être honnête, ce qui n'est pas la même chose." Ariès, *Histoire des populations françaises*, 11 (1971, 13), English translation M. R. The introduction of the first edition is dated 1946.

So in his study of the child and of family life during the *ancien régime*, published in 1960, Ariès freely moved between past and present.²⁴ Also E. H. Carr emphasized that “[t]he historian belongs not to the past but to the present,” and that history is “an unending dialogue between the present and the past.”²⁵ Nonetheless, another British historian Adrian Wilson who in 1980 evaluated Ariès’s work in *History and Theory*, was absolutely indignant at Ariès’s “present-centered” approach and his explicit defense of it, since it showed that Ariès’s “present-mindedness” was “open and unashamed.” Wilson declared that what distinguishes the professional historian from amateurs like Ariès is that he is capable of superseding the problems of present-centeredness.²⁶

Today Wilson’s point appears implausible while Ariès’s approach upsets no-one. Today historians more or less accept that the questions they address tend to rise from present-day phenomena. This is even thought to be one reason as to why each generation poses new kinds of questions and by this rewrites history. The relationship between past and present remains uneasy, but nonetheless inescapable.²⁷

3.

Another difference between the works of the old school and current schools, readily perceivable by the reader, concerns the anonymous teller vs. the reasoning author. During the last few decades of the twentieth century, historians generally adopted a new convention of writing works of history in an open, communicative style, as contributions to a discussion in which they were active participants. It was a sign of more fundamental changes in historical research.

In the older works of history the interpreting and arguing historian disappears after the foreword behind the scene or becomes an impersonal “we.” Although it was long customary to place the list of primary and secondary sources at the beginning of the volume, the reader was kept ignorant of the main arguments until the concluding chapter. If not on purpose, then at least in effect the plot line was modeled after detective novels.

24. Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), passim, e.g., 118, 123–125; Ariès, *L’Enfant et la vie familiale sous l’ancien régime* (1960), passim, e.g., 123–124, 129–131.

25. Carr, *What is History?* 19–20, 25–38, 49, quotations 20, 24.

26. Wilson, “The Infancy of the History of Childhood: An Appraisal of Philippe Ariès”, quotations 136, 150.

27. For the discussion, see, e.g., Johanson, “On Agency”; Mandelbrote, “History, Narrative, and Time”; Spiegel, “Revising the Past / Revisiting the Present: How Change Happens in Historiography”.

Yet the self-reflective, discussing and arguing “I,” first person singular, has long featured in works of history that at the time of their publishing were not in line with mainstream historical writing. In his *Feudal Society* Marc Bloch used the first person singular, and in other respects too his style anticipated the communicative style of today: he addressed his readers and presented to them his problems with sources.²⁸ In Braudel’s *The Mediterranean* historians doing their work featured only occasionally, but by his trilogy *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme* (*Civilization and Capitalism*) Braudel had adopted a more communicative style of writing. In his case we may perhaps associate this with his dialogue with Immanuel Wallerstein whose *The Modern World-System* follows a sociological tradition of an openly argumentative style.

Historians of current schools now show, as a rule, their cards right away. You do not have to read many pages before you have an idea of what will be argued for and against on the pages that follow. You are probably also introduced to the conceptual tools that the author has made use of when working on the source material. The idea is to enable the reader to reflect on the line of reasoning followed by the author. Accordingly, the self-reflective, discussing and arguing “I” does not disappear from sight, but is present at least in the introduction and in conclusions, if not throughout the whole work. By this the reader is invited to join the discussion, as it were.

This style of historical writing was associated with new perceptions of historical research. Most importantly, historians now formulated their research problems differently. This led to new kinds of approaches in historical research – and ultimately to a profound rethinking of the issues of primary sources and reliability, and what counts as valid evidence and reasoning.

New perceptions of historical research originate, on the one hand, from conceptual and theoretical impulses offered by social sciences, linguistics, anthropology and ethnology. They had first nourished early *Annales* historians in France, but after the mid-twentieth century interdisciplinary impulses have generally featured in historical research in the West. With this new-orientation of historians’ research strategies, entirely new concepts have established themselves in historians’ vocabulary, such as agency, deconstruction, representation, immaterial heritage, imagined communities, invented traditions, politics of remembrance, places of memory, and the poetics of history. In short, present-day historians make use of a rich conceptual tool box.

28. Bloch, *Feudal Society*, passim, e.g., xxi, 27, 59, 101; Bloch, *La société féodale*, passim, e.g., 8, 47, 95, 162.

New conceptions of historical research may, on the other hand, also be associated with the political situation²⁹ and with the entry of new generations of historians who had different kinds of experiences and often cross-disciplinary backgrounds. Their scholarly interests turned to other kinds of topics, questions and groups of people than had been customary in the interwar period.³⁰

A major break with the ideas of the old school came with historians' change of perspective: from spotlighted actors on history's stage to those who until then had been left in the shadow. Historians may or may not have striven to see things in the perspective of the people under study, but as a rule they now strove to describe these people as actors, if not always in history, then at least in their own lives, and to understand these people's own ways of reasoning.

In 1961 E. H. Carr could still write that "Caesar's crossing of that petty stream, the Rubicon, is a fact of history, whereas the crossing of the Rubicon by millions of other people before or since interests nobody at all."³¹ Hardly had his words been printed before the anonymous millions came to be seen as actors making history.

4.

How to reach the ideas of the illiterate in times beyond oral history? And how to shed light on historical phenomena that, due to squeamishness or some other reason, have left few verbal traces? Historians like to think that no phenomenon disappears without leaving any traces. If there are few verbal traces, there may be other traces, or at least indirect traces – it only takes the professional skills and imagination of the historian to figure out what they might be and where they might be found.

29. E.g. August, "Narrative, Experience and Class: Nineteenth-century Social History in Light of the Linguistic Turn"; Levi, "The Origins of the Modern State in the Microhistorical Perspective".

30. The new approaches and research interests included, e.g., history from below, women's history, family and household history, history of childhood, oral history, history of reading and literacy, visual history, history of the body, environmental history, history of mentalities, history of everyday life, and eventually history of consumption, history of elites, history of the senses. Burke, ed. *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*; Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century*; Iggers and Wang, *A Global History of Modern Historiography*; Koselleck, "Erfahrungswandel und Methodenwechsel: Eine historisch-anthropologische Skizze".

31. Carr, *What is history?* 5–6.

The entry of new kinds of people as protagonists in works on history started at the aggregate level. In post-war France, *Annales* historians wished to study phenomena of the *longue durée*, such as *mentalité*, and their slow alteration among the ordinary people. Reinhart Koselleck thinks that history of mentalities requires specific kinds of verbal sources and experiences of the world and environment expressed in words.³² That would, however, leave in the dark the *mentalité* of the great majority who did not leave for future historians a single line of text of their own.

There is no way of knowing, say, how a married couple in the intimacy of their matrimonial bed ended up with the decision to limit the number of children. But the consequences of thousands and thousands of such decisions can be traced by drawing graphs over birth rates. Thus in order to produce demographic graphs, *Annales* historians compiled in archives thousands of brief recordings of marriages, births, infant baptisms, deaths – virtually the only pieces of identifiable evidence remaining of millions of illiterate persons. Similarly in Britain the Cambridge Group undertook path-breaking, laborious studies on historical demography and family reconstruction.

Changing trends in birth rates suggested changes in mentalities, but left people concerned indefinite and anonymous. In his study about French demographic history and the beginnings of birth control, published in 1948, Philippe Ariès did approach the issue in terms of birth and death rates, but what he really was after was “the most profound and secret changes of human mentality.” For this he needed many kinds of source materials and methods, including participating observation. And in order to find out when and how the change from many births and infant deaths to few births and infant deaths occurred, he reconstructed individual family histories with miniature biographies – today we would say that there he used a micro-historical approach.³³

In the 1960s, at the time of the publishing of two path-breaking works, E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) and Eric

32. “Denn Mentalitäten ... lassen sich nur durch die spezifisch sprachlich gebrochene und sprachlich ermöglichte Erfahrung von Welt und Umwelt aufspüren.” Koselleck, “Erfahrungswandel und Methodenwechsel: Eine historisch-anthropologische Skizze”, 47.

33. “Les variations de natalité, de la longévité, de la répartition des densités, des mouvements de population, tels qu’ils son succédé dans le le temps, nous ont apparu comme des manifestations dénombrables des changements plus profonds et plus secrets de la mentalité humaine, de l’idée que l’homme se fait de lui-même.” Ariès, *Histoire des populations françaises*, 13 (1971, 15).

Hobsbawm's *Labouring Men* (1964), the post-war optimism was still alive and well.³⁴ Nonetheless, also the storyline of the progress of control and discipline from late medieval to modern times that we today associate with Michael Foucault was already there: in Philippe Ariès's study of childhood and family life during the *ancien régime*³⁵ and in Thompson's "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism."³⁶ Thus Foucault's works, from *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* in 1961 to *Surveiller et punir* in 1975, that would prove so enormously influential, came just in time.

Another research strategy for reaching those who had been left in shadow was adopted in a handful of now famous studies, in which individual shepherds, peasants, and other villagers featured as protagonists of the story, as historical actors with names and personal characteristics.³⁷ Today the sixteenth-century miller Menocchio, the sixteenth-century imposter Martin Guerre, and the villages of Montaillou and Santena make up a part of historians' professional jargon. These early studies were followed by other examples of methodological and theoretical inventiveness, with such bizarre subject matters as the holy greyhound and a great cat massacre.³⁸

What these studies share is a research strategy in which a detailed study of one person, one village, one case of disorder is used to tell of much larger phenomena. In the early 1980s Italian historians began to refer to this approach as microhistory. Thanks to a premeditated research strategy by the historian concerned, the story of one person, one village, or one riot, branches off in many directions and comes to cover many themes. By this strategy the historian, in fact, follows what Jacques Revel considers to be the maxim that all historians ought to adopt: why make it simple when one can

34. In 1961 E. H. Carr wrote: "Modern historiography has grown up during the past two centuries in this dual belief in progress, and cannot survive without it, since it is this belief which provides it with its standard of significance, its touchstone for distinguishing between the real and the accidental." Carr, *What is History?* 118.

35. For "pre-Foucauldian" elements in Ariès's reasoning, see the original French edition (1960) or the unabridged English translation (1962). Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, "Scolastic Life", 137–336; Ariès, *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime*, "La vie scolastique", 143–376.

36. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism".

37. Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*; Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*; Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village 1294–1324*; Levi, *Inheriting Power: The Story of an Exorcist*.

38. Schmitt, *The Holy Greyhound: Guinefort, Healer of Children Since the Thirteenth Century*; Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre*.

make it complicated.³⁹ What is gained by such intensive case studies is the increasing richness of our images of the past and by this a review of received views about the past.

The research strategy in which an intensive case study branching off in many directions is used to discuss big issues has proved very fruitful. It has in the last few decades been applied to most varied themes, places and spaces, and to studying many kinds of people, high and low. We can easily pick up fine examples – all based on extensive archival work – of this research strategy. They include studies of those at the bottom of social hierarchy, orphanage children,⁴⁰ and of those at the top of it, early modern aristocracy,⁴¹ as well as of those in between, such as Parisian *menu peuple*,⁴² early modern merchants,⁴³ and servants and masters.⁴⁴ It has also served well in a rethinking of a truly traditional form of historical research, biography.⁴⁵ The stories of Leo Africanus,⁴⁶ three German Behaim boys⁴⁷ and three seventeenth-century women⁴⁸ develop into broad canvases of the early modern Mediterranean, European, and Atlantic world.

Only few of the authors see their work in terms of microhistory. Nonetheless, these pieces of historical research share with the microhistorical approach some essential characteristics, as defined by Giovanni Levi in Chapter Five below: an attempt to narrate without hiding the rules of the game that the historian has followed; an effort to find fundamental questions by rigorously examining one single case; consideration of the inconsistencies of the reality and the proportionality of knowledge – that it is always possible to find other possible interpretations.

39. "... pourquoi faire simple quand on peut faire compliqué ?" Revel, "L'histoire au ras du sol", XXIV.

40. E.g., Safley, *Children of the Labouring Poor*; Söderlind, *Barnhem för flickor*.

41. E.g., Ilmakunnas, *Ett ståndsmässigt liv: Släkten von Fersens livsstil på 1700-talet*; Vainio-Korhonen, *Sophie Creutz och hennes tid: Adelsliv i 1700-talets Finland*.

42. Farge, *Vivre dans la rue à Paris au XVIIIe siècle*.

43. Müller, *The Merchant Houses of Stockholm, c. 1640–1800*.

44. Sambrook, *Keeping Their Place*; Sarasúa, *Criados, nodrizas y amos*; Steedman, *Master and Servant*.

45. Levi, "Les usages de la biographie".

46. Davis, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim between Worlds: In Search of Leo Africanus*.

47. Ozment, *Three Behaim Boys: Growing up in Early Modern Germany*.

48. Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives*.

5.

The issue of sources and source criticism was subject to a major rethinking among historians in the last few decades of the twentieth century. Why was this? What was it that historians felt so uncomfortable with concerning the Rankean tradition? Generations of students of history had been taught that as historians they must first and foremost ask how things actually happened and, in order to find this out, they must learn to tell real facts from false ones and reliable sources from unreliable ones.

Rigorous source criticism and the distinction between primary and secondary sources have conventionally been considered the merit and achievement of the research tradition that started in the nineteenth century with Leopold von Ranke. Thus when we open a piece of historical research composed during the glory days of the Rankean doctrine, we more or less expect to find plain facts and proficient source criticism. Instead we may, in fact, find uncritical use of sources and statements based on vague and questionable evidence.

One example should suffice, that of the classic case of Richard III. By way of fiction, Josephine Tey's detective story *The Daughter of Time*,⁴⁹ published in 1951, made a nonsense of respected historians' use of sources. The principal targets of Tey's mockery⁵⁰ were Charles Oman and James Gairdner. Oman⁵¹ was a rewarding target, since only a good decade earlier he had himself discussed historical episodes that present "all the puzzles of a good detective novel, where the reader works out the clues," and had given as an example the case of Richard III and the two little princes in the Tower. Oman not only required that a historian must end up in "definite final judgement," but was also sure that in this case he had judged correctly.⁵² Gairdner's study, published in 1879, appears, as regards evidence, as if

49. Tey, *The Daughter of Time*. "Josephine Tey" was one pseudonym of Elizabeth MacKintosh (1896/97–1952).

50. Tey's other targets include the Boston Massacre, the Covenanters and Tonypandy (*ibid.*, 93–95, 118–119, 130–132). For the latter, see Smith, "Tonypandy 1910: Definitions of Community".

51. Oman's *From the Accession of Richard II. to the Death of Richard III. (1377–1485)* is sparsely annotated. As regards Richard III, he gives Thomas More's *The History of King Richard the Third* and the Croyland Chronicle as his principal sources, but mentions also Tudor annalists (*ibid.*, 449, 502–504). In Tey's book, Oman appears under the cover name Sir Cuthbert Oliphant.

52. "It is impossible to acquit Crookback and to explain the whole tragedy as 'Tudor calumny.'" Oman, *On the Writing of History*, 27, 40.

anticipating by a century the postmodern slogan “anything goes.”⁵³ It would be difficult to read it today as a serious piece of historical research, were it not for references to it in modern studies of Richard III.

Tey’s detective story seems to have launched a new War of the Roses among historians – but with no winning side. As modern historians, the participants refer to appropriate primary sources, partly the same ones. Nonetheless, even an uninitiated reader can see who leans toward the Lancaster side, and who toward the York side. And even when the historian’s focus is elsewhere, the reader can deduce who feels sympathy for and who feels antipathy toward Richard III.⁵⁴ Witnessing the endless debate for and against Richard III, Jeremy Potter concluded: “As Francis Bacon and Josephine Tey have reminded us, truth is the daughter of time, and have five hundred years really not been enough? It seems not ...” Potter’s answer was to adopt another research strategy.⁵⁵

Could we conclude that the case of Richard III tells of the impasse in which the Rankean research strategy had ended up? And that a way out could be found by adopting an entirely different research strategy?

The case of Richard III also serves as an introduction to the problematic issue of primary and secondary sources. Awestruck by the authority of Thomas More as a contemporary witness, the two Rankean historians, Gairdner and Oman, swallowed More’s words hook, line, and sinker. It does no credit to professional historians of the old school that it needed a fictional policeman and a slightly less fictional⁵⁶ historian of a detective story to point out to the reader that not only had More grown up in the household of Richard’s enemy, but neither had he been an eye-witness. The dramatic council meeting in the Tower that More had described as if it were an eye-witness account, took place when he had been a child of about

53. Gairdner’s evidence includes speculations based on Shakespeare’s play and weak innuendoes of Tudor writers about Richard as tangled up in other deaths (“murders”), and word-for-word quotations of fictive lines by More. Gairdner, *The Life and Reign of Richard III*, 4, 11–21, 40–44, 55, 66, 82–86, 100–106, 112–114, 120–121, 138–141, 152–165, 256–260, 305–310.

54. We have looked at the following: Hanham, *Richard III and His Early Historian 1483–1535*; Horrox, *Richard III: A Study of Service*; Kendall, *Richard the Third*; Ross, *Richard III* (reference to Tey’s book, lxv); Wood, *Joan of Arc and Richard III: Sex, saints and government in the Middle Ages*.

55. Potter, *Good King Richard? An Account of Richard III and His Reputation*, 6.

56. Elizabeth MacKintosh (“Josephine Tey”) or someone else must have done some research work, judging from the identifiable references in the book.

five. "Everything in that history had been hearsay."⁵⁷

A comparable example of a problematic source is Daniel Defoe's *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, published in 1724–1726. It has been read as a primary source, e.g., as regards productive child labor in eighteenth-century Britain.⁵⁸ However, if you read *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, it turns out that Defoe never reported of having himself seen any young children working, but he only repeated what he had been told, in fact by the interested parties.⁵⁹ Consequently, despite the fact that Defoe's book is a contemporary text, it is not an eye-witness' account as regards child labor in eighteenth-century Britain, but should be read as a secondary source – and a tricky one at that. Since it is presumed that Defoe never committed all the commissioned tours that he so vividly described in his book, it is hard to tell facts from fiction.

In their fixation to tell nothing but how things actually happened, Rankean historians ended up in acting against their own doctrine of reliable sources. And by pursuing nothing but real facts they failed to see the richness of information embedded in the their sources. Charles Oman sniffed at hagiographies: "Putting aside the biographies of saints – usually worthless – though there are some which ... contain noteworthy facts ..."⁶⁰ For subsequent generations of medievalists, hagiographies proved to be a goldmine.

6.

Late twentieth-century historians – with their new conceptions of historical research, new research strategies and approaches and new kinds of questions – had to rethink many tenets and practices. The difficulties of finding sources about the people and phenomena they now were interested in taught them to consider as potential sources whatever remnants, traces and

57. Tey, *The Daughter of Time*, 71.

58. Cunningham, "The Employment and Underemployment of Children England c. 1680–1851".

59. This is explicit in two of the cases referred to by Cunningham (*ibid.*), Norfolk and Taunton. Likewise in the third case, children in cottage industries in Hallifax, Defoe only repeats what was told to him. There are additional petty hints at working children, but none that would suggest that he had seen any himself, with the possible exception of the boys whom Defoe said guided him and his fellow travelers over a hill. Defoe, *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, Vol. One, 62, 266, 283, 368, 372–374; Vol. Two, 195, 222, 238, 264, 324, 355–356.

60. Oman, *On the Writing of History*, 51.

fractions there might be left from the past. When pursuing the maximum amount of information that their sources could offer, they learned to read and see old and new sources with new eyes: not so much as judges as trackers, explorers, and voyagers, and as readers of stories. Along with all this, other basic issues in historical research underwent a rethinking.

Historians take it for granted that their sources are more or less fragmentary, defective, faulty, imperfect and insufficient – in short, far from anything they would wish for. Every great fire, war, coup d'état, revolution, catastrophe (to say nothing of disintegration, decomposition and degradation) has destroyed for all time so much of what once was there. "All that is solid melts into air," in the poetic translation of Marx's more prosaic phrase. Moreover, there is so much that never was there, in the first instant, for both systematic and random reasons, and because so much of life is lived with no trace of it left for posterity.

Even finding information about quite ordinary phenomena may present serious problems, if contemporaries (those of them who brought into being information still available to historians) were not interested in documenting and recording them. Women working for earnings is a case in point. Well into the twentieth century, many forms of women's paid work took place under such terms and circumstances that they remained largely unrecorded and undocumented. Thus it may be very difficult to find systematic information about much of women's paid work, although there is often plenty of more or less anecdotal evidence of it, both verbal (written and oral) and visual (e.g., in paintings of market squares). When using such anecdotal evidence, the historian should be honest enough to let the reader know it.

What the historian can in such cases do is to use indirect evidence. It requires ingenuity and a good knowledge of archival materials, but may be truly rewarding, as is evidenced by Kirsi Vainio-Korhonen's case study on commercial handicraft by men and women around the decades of 1800.⁶¹ Another example of insightful use of archival material is offered by Allison Kay's study on female entrepreneurship in Victorian London. Kay is able to show that among Victorian middle-class women entrepreneurship was a much more important form of making earnings and such women had more opportunities to engage in economic activity than has been thought. In ad-

61. Vainio-Korhonen, "Handicrafts as Professions and Sources of Income in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century Turku (Åbo): A Gender Viewpoint to Economic History".

dition to valuable empirical evidence, Kay's study also serves as a practical guide to how to work as a historian, since she is laudably explicit on the process of constructing her arguments.⁶²

A related case of scanty evidence is offered by women's unemployment. It long remained virtually unrecorded, because it was either ignored or not taken seriously. Even anecdotal evidence may be hard to come by, since women (and men) often had good reasons for hiding their unemployment from the authorities. Thus historians must make the most of every piece of information and must follow every clue that they come across. Here the Great Depression was a turning point, although the classic study in the field, Jahoda's et al. *Marienthal*, published in 1933, still largely ignored unemployed women.⁶³ Nonetheless, in the interwar period information of unemployed and underemployed women started to multiply.⁶⁴ This certainly made it easier for historians to get hold of women's unemployment, though statistics remained defective.⁶⁵

The challenge of sources as regards obscure people and phenomena in the past can be illustrated by the case of slaves in ancient and medieval Europe. In his polemic essay, "written in the shadow of the postmodern challenge," Niall McKeown remarks that slaves in ancient Rome "produced little literature and authors from the Roman elite were generally unconcerned with slaves," while slaves were mentioned in numerous short inscriptions, often in tombstones. McKeown discusses how historians and literary scholars have made use of such source materials. It turns out that the same pieces of text have served as evidence for diametrically opposite arguments. In broad terms, different interpretations have followed the political conjectures of their time, the location of different intellectual "schools," and the ideological position of the historian concerned. The authors have especially faced problems "when moving from isolated evidence to large generalisations." McKeown concludes that ancient slavery "offers a fascinating test of how

62. Kay, *The Foundations of Female Entrepreneurship: Enterprise, Home and Household in London, c. 1800–1870*.

63. In this study, more space was given to experiences of wives of unemployed men than to experiences of unemployed women. Jahoda et al. *Marienthal: The Sociography of an Unemployed Community*.

64. E.g. *International Labour Review* XXVII:4 (1933), 443–470; XXVII:5 (1933), 620–630; XXXI:4 (1935), 463–497; XXXVIII:6 (1938), 825–831.

65. E.g., Lane, *Trying To Make A Living: Studies in the economic life of women in interwar Sweden*; Rahikainen, "Women in Relief Work: Female unemployment in Helsinki before World War II".

difficult (or easy?) it can be to produce narratives from the past.”⁶⁶

Medieval slaves, thralls, in Scandinavia have been studied as they feature in medieval sagas, laws and other texts.⁶⁷ Such written evidence has with much ingenuity been combined with other kinds of sources, from topographic analyses to archeological material. Graves, grave goods, and a fireplace in a barn (cowshed) may tell of the status and living conditions of thralls or people of their kind, while systematic etymological-semantic analyses of terms used for thralls and identification of thralls in place-names and runic inscriptions shed more light on thralldom. All the scholars involved discuss as a matter of course the many uncertainties in their reasoning.⁶⁸ They do not strive to fill in the gaps by using “a professional sleight of hand to produce a narrative usable to their readers,” as according to McKeown historians of Roman slavery have done.⁶⁹

This suggests that a research strategy that combines different kinds of source materials, if critically used, may in many cases be more fruitful than repeated re-interpretations of the same contemporary texts. In practice the use of very different kinds of source materials requires either a keen cooperation of several scholars competent in working with such materials, or preferably, as Janken Myrdal argues, that the historian combines information derived from different kinds of source materials. In Chapter Seven below Myrdal shows with several inventive examples the usefulness of the method. To mark out the contrast to interdisciplinary research work, he calls such a method source pluralism.

7.

Hagiographies may, indeed, be poor sources as regards their explicit function, lives of saints, but as an unintended by-product they open to present-day historians a vivid panorama of medieval life. This is how Marc Bloch had seen them,⁷⁰ but a general re-evaluation of hagiographies as sources

66. McKeown, *The Invention of Ancient Slavery?* 10, 22–29, 50–51, 60, 124, 160–163, quotations 8, 11, 139, 162–163.

67. Nevéus, *Trälarna i landskapslagarnas samhälle Danmark och Sverige*; Iversen, *Knechtschaft im mittelalterlichen Norwegen*; Myrdal and Morell, eds. *The Agrarian History of Sweden: from 4000 BC to AD 2000*, passim; Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, 52–61.

68. Lindkvist and Myrdal, eds. *Trälar: Ofria i agararsamhället från vikingatid till medeltid*.

69. McKeown, *The Invention of Ancient Slavery?* 10.

70. Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, 63; Bloch, “Apologie pour l’histoire”, 25.