



(Re)encountering the sources

A conference organized by the Department of History of the University of Zurich,
October 6/7, 2022

Call for Papers

Sources are at the heart of the historian's daily work. The founding of the Department of History at the University of Zurich in the 1870s was itself one outcome of a sustained focus on sources in historical research and teaching. The initial decades of historical scholarship in Zurich were characterised by the compilation and indexing of sources in numerous edition projects and by students learning to engage with source materials.

The Zurich example fits into much broader academic developments. Seminars, both as new participatory forms of teaching and as institutions in themselves (the department as “Historisches Seminar”), developed directly from historicism’s fascination with sources. The subsequent stages of historical scholarship can also be traced to their respective source interests—whether one looks at how economic and social history in the 1970s and 1980s came to give preference to charts and tables instead of narrative sources, or at the numerous disputes between empiricists remaining close to sources and theorists more critical of them, or at the shifting nature and format of sources in history from below, in gender history or in historical anthropology. Furthermore, the question of what a source *is* and how it should be approached has long been shared by a whole range of neighbouring disciplines—as demonstrated in how source materials now include images, objects, and audio-visual media.

Digital research increasingly shapes the everyday work of historians. In addition to the opportunities and challenges of innumerable digital edition projects, the impact of digitisation on individual researchers, their projects, and the historical scholarship of the future remains a burning issue. Do the seemingly ever more inexhaustible digital archives of the present mean greater availability and thus increased research freedom across geographical borders? Or do digital formats, platforms, and algorithms also pre-structure the corpora of research projects? What role does the “power of the archive” (Achim Landwehr) and its “tacit narratives” (Eric Ketelaar), traditionally based on selection, categorisation, and indexing, play in the digital context? And what, in turn, does digitisation mean for the research of non-digital holdings, for example in private or company archives, whose limited accessibility often pose problems? Finally, what methodological adjustments in digital source criticism must be made?

The great importance of source work in historical education thus continues into the present. How can source criticism and interpretation at school and at university, and between the research and public spheres, be more closely interlinked? Large-scale transcription marathons, blogging about new discoveries, collective edition projects and an increasing democratisation of access to

sources constitute examples of the growing importance of sources at the interface between academic historical research and public history.

This trans-epochal conference, which the Department of History is organising as part of the celebrations for its 150th anniversary, focuses on the historian's encounters with sources from three interrelated perspectives:

1. *History*: We aim to take a fresh look at the connections between the history of the discipline and its understanding of sources and source practices since the 1870s—in Zurich, Switzerland and elsewhere. To what extent did societal change and new intellectual trends transform historians' encounters with sources, and vice versa? Which historical approaches regarding how we work with sources deserve reconsideration today?
2. *Access*: The challenge of accessing sources, central to late 19th century historians' concerns about dealing with the sources, is quite different in the 21st century, and yet has not lost its relevance. To what extent does the increasing digital availability of sources make historical research more global, unmediated, and democratic? What challenges arise in dealing with (allegedly) dislocated volumes of data? In light of systematic gaps within digitisation, the overrepresentation of English-language sources, or the absence of already underrepresented groups, what new forms of inaccessibility are embedded in these developments, and how can we counter them?
3. *Material*: The direct encounter with a source immediately evokes the “effect of the real” (Arlette Farge). The material existence and presence of the source conveys a truth regarding its content. This constitutes a problem that source interpretation must face again and again. How can these old questions about source criticism be discussed anew using new approaches to material cultural? How are materiality, mediality, source criticism, and individual archival experiences interrelated? And how do the transformations of the material following the various stages of digitisation and the transformative dynamics of “digital born data” fit into this?

The conference will be held in both German and English. Please send proposals for presentations (20 minutes, abstracts max. 300 words, short CV), to sarah.schober@uzh.ch by **1 November 2021**.

Travel and accommodation costs in Zurich may be applied for according to need.