



*On Sources.
History in the Archives.*

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The historian's work implies a crucial tension between theory, methods and historiography, on the one hand, and sources, on the other. We historians tend to research on fashionable subjects and fields, we adopt in vogue approaches, we like discussions on theory and methods. But then we need to go to the archives and museums, to deal with documents, to produce quantitative series from very rough evidence, to understand images... we all need to work with sources.

The most positivist views of history have always put the accent on the use of historical "documents" (*lato senso*). That to the extent that it is not difficult to hear that sources are the (only) driving force of historical research: we research only on those subjects for which sources are abundant and even we sometimes say that we cannot carry out a particular type of research because of a lack of sources. It is also common to speak of different sources for different approaches and fields: one can not do cultural history by looking at fiscal sources; global history is impossible by only using local archives; a cadastre is only useful for economic or demographic history...

A certain fetishism regarding sources is common among historians and some work only on those aspects of the past for which they think that sources are at hand. This leads to the problem of the tension between questions and working hypothesis, on the one side, and sources and archival availability, on the other side. Much of this fetishism with sources leads to a descriptive history, but testing hypotheses implies a huge effort to find the right historical evidence as well as to interpret it

These are real problems, maybe the most important problems, of any historian. But is it possible to read the sources in different ways? Can we get unexpected information from them? How can we make the sources speak on the subject we desire? Is it possible to modulate their "language" in order to get from them a particular approach? How can we establish the difficult dialogue between our questions and the sources we have? How to be open to messages that they give to us and which do not fit in our questions? When, how and in which direction should we shift our questions because of the sources? The general answer is simple: we need flexibility and know-how. This is, however, a too easy and rather stupid answer. What do we do in each case?

Know-how implies an empirical, practical and slow learning process. The aim of this seminar is to discuss all these matters in a practical way. We will present *read* and discuss different "documents" to explore their possibilities (cadastrs, probate inventories, distinct sorts of written texts, correspondence...). Researchers, MW fellows and colleagues will be invited to comment on their own experience, on their problems in using or looking for sources, on the dialogue between their questions and their evidence, on the way they have reshaped their research because of that dialogue. Some scholars from other institutions will be also invited and the visit to some archives is also being considered.

(The seminar is mainly addressed to early modern historians but the problems to discuss are common also among scholars working on modern and current history; therefore adjustments in the programme could be made if there is a considerable group of them).