



Educational Package on Historical Research

SCRITTI PEDAGOGICI



Introduction: Making History...on line

IN FIRENZE
G. C. SANSONI, EDITORE

1891

MAKING HISTORY...ON LINE

Prof. Paolo Bianchini

Università di Torino
Torino, Italia

1) The Meaning of History

Before starting making history - on line and out line - we have to clarify the meaning of the world history. What does really mean "History"?

The word "History" means at the same time:

- the fact, the event of the past;
- the story of that fact.

This ambiguity goes back to the root of the Greek word *ἱστορία* which was *vid*, the same root of the Latin and Greek verb "video". That means that, at the origins, the historian was intended first of all as the witness of the event.

But we know that more than one witness can assist to the same event and, on the other hand, that some events have no witness.

both the meanings are very important for the historian. A fact indeed exist only if someone can tell it. That is why commonly we consider that History begins with the birth of the writing. Before that moment we speak about pre-history. In our concept of history, then, the fact cannot exist without his tale. That means that, for making history, we don't need a fact, but we really need a story, because if a fact cannot exist without a story, a story can exist without a fact.

but the main difference between an historian and a novelist is that the first should write stories that really happened, whilst the second' job is to imagine and to create veracious stories and words.

That means that the historian's work is often hard because, on one hand, for some events can be very difficult to find sources, on the other hand, for the same fact of the past we can have different stories (that is true also for the present: think about a car crash!).

finally, we have always to remember that, as a human product, History can never be objective and to admit that there is not only one history.

A different meaning has the word "historiography", often confused with history by non expert historians. Historiography is the history of history, or, broadly speaking, historiography examines the writing of history and the use of historical methods. As the tools of historical investigation have changed over time and space, the term itself bears multiple meanings and is not readily associated with a single all-encompassing definition. For that reason, There are three basic issues involved in historiography:

- the study of the development of history as an academic discipline over time, as well as its development in different cultures and moments;
- the study of the academic tools, methods and approaches that have been and are being used, by historians;
- a specific body of historical writing that was written during a specific time concerning a specific issue. For instance, a statement about "Contemporary historiography" refers to some issue in the academic discipline of Contemporary History, and not to the actual history of the Contemporary epoch or to historical works written in this time.

2) Building history

How can the historian try to do correctly his job?

1. first of all, choosing and questioning properly his sources. Sources are the only instrument that allows the historian to witness to the event by a good perspective;
2. adopting a good method of analysis and of writing. That is the only way to do a scientific work and to help the reader to check our thesis.

In these paragraphs we will focus on the sources, because they are the first job instrument of the historian.

2.1 - How to choose a source

To choose the right sources is perhaps the most difficult and one of the most important skills of an historian. Many different kind of sources exist and also exist many different ways of categorisation. First, we distinguish:

Primary sources: documents or physical objects which were written or created during the time that we are studying. These sources offer an inside view of the event.

Some examples will clarify their nature and utility:

- The Diary of Anne Frank - the document contains the experiences of a Jewish family during Word War II described by one of the witness during the dramatic events of the war and of the shoah;
- The Constitution of a Country- The document can illustrate the systems of laws, the political and administrative organisation of a country giving a good acknowledgement of his present and of his past;
- The journals and the books written in the historical period that we are studying. We can find news and opinions about the events written by men who lived it;
- Weavings and pottery. They are the typical material sources used by the archeologues and the historians of the Ancient history. They are often the only way to try to rebuild the history of a village or a civilisation. Just think about the Mesopotamian cultures or the Native American history.

Secondary sources: they interpret and analyze primary sources. These sources are removed from the event. They may have pictures, quotes or graphics of primary sources in them.

Some examples:

- A journal or a magazine article which interprets or reviews previous findings;
- An history textbook;
- An essay or a book about the effects of WWI;
- A paper contained in the [Writing History On Line](#) Section of the History On Line Portal

An other method of categorisation is related to the nature of the document. Following this method the source can be:

Written (i.e documents, books, laws, textbooks, diaries, journals).

See also:

- [Chapter 3 - Laws and official Texts as Historical Sources;](#)
- [Chapter 4 - School Textbooks as Sources for the Historical Educational Research;](#)
- [Chapter 5 - Uses and abuses of literature: The subject of literature as a resource for the history of education;](#)
- [Chapter 6 - Periodicals \(Newspapers, Journals and Magazines\) for Historical Research.](#)
- Oral (i.e interviews, songs, music, speeches);
- Iconic-visual (i.e pictures, photos, statues, maps).

See also:

- [Chapter 7 - Pictures and Iconography as Historical Sources;](#)
- [Chapter 8 - Caricatures as Historical Sources;](#)
- [Chapter 9 - Cartoons as Historical Sources.](#)
- Material (i.e archaeological objects, caricatures, monuments).

A good historian should be able not only to choose the best source for his research, but also to use more than one source. Usually we need at least a second source to verify the first one and to complete our informations.

2.2 How to find out a source

Now that we know the different kind of sources we have to learn to find them out. Documents are conserved in different places, which have different rules and functions:

- Archives;
- Libraries;
- museums (ground).

An **archive** is at the same time a collection of historical records and the location in which the collection is kept. Archives contain documents which have been accumulated by a person or an organization.

The archives of an individual may contain personal documents, as papers, letters, photographs, computer files or diaries, created or collected by the person. The archives of an organization usually contain many other types of records, such as financial and administrative files, business records, laws and projects of laws, official correspondence and meeting minutes.

Even if many different kinds of archives exist, following the recent census of archivists in the United States, we can identify five major types of institution which are used to create and to possess archives:

- academic;
- for profit (business);
- public administrations;
- church;
- non profit;
- other (i.e. foundations and museums).

Usually archives contain records selected for permanent or long-term preservation, on their enduring

research value. Archival records are normally unpublished and unique, unlike books or magazines, which are produced in many identical copies. For that reason archives have different functions and organization if compared to libraries, although archival collections can often be found within library buildings and vice versa. On this matter see also [Chapter 2 - On Line Archives](#).

A **library** is at the same time a collection of books and the building that houses the collection. If the archives usually host documents generated as the "by-product" of normal human activities, the libraries hold specifically authored information "products". Traditionally, libraries contain every types of printed works, included encyclopaedias, newspapers and reviews. Nowadays, libraries are also repositories and access points for maps, prints, or other documents and various storage media such as microform (microfilm/microfiche), audio tapes, CDs, cassettes, videotapes, and DVDs. Libraries often also provide public facilities to access subscription databases and the Internet.

The catalogues of the bigger and most important libraries are available on line. To facilitate the researches, they are often collected in opacs (On-line Public Access Catalogue), which allow simultaneous searches in different catalogues.

Many methods exist for dividing libraries in types, but the simplest one is by traditional professional divisions. Following that method, we distinguish:

- Public libraries or public lending libraries, providing service to the general public and making at least some of their books available for borrowing;
- Academic libraries, located on the campuses of colleges and universities and serve primarily the students and faculty of that and other academic institutions;
- Research libraries, intended for supporting scholarly research, they maintain permanent collections and attempt to provide access to all necessary material;
- School libraries, designed to support the school's curriculum;
- Special libraries, containing all other libraries. Many private and public organizations, including hospitals, museums, research laboratories, law firms, and many government departments and agencies, but also individuals, maintain their own libraries for specialized research related to their work. Special libraries may or may not be accessible to some identified part of the general public.

Following the definition of the International Council of Museums, a **museum** is a "permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the *tangible and intangible* heritage of humanity and its environment, for the purposes of education, study, and enjoyment".¹ Museums collect and care for objects of scientific, artistic, or historical importance and make them available for public viewing through exhibits that may be permanent or temporary. There are many types of museums, from very large collections in major cities, covering many of the categories below, to very small museums covering either a particular location in a general way, or a particular subject, such an individual notable person. Categories include: fine arts, applied arts, craft, archaeology, anthropology and ethnology, history, cultural history, military history, science, technology, children's museums, natural history, numismatics, botanical and zoological gardens and philately. Within these categories many museums specialize further, e.g. museums of modern art, local history, aviation history, agriculture or geology.

In the museums the historian can find not only masterpieces, but also every day objects, products of the material culture of a people in a particular moment of his history.

¹ "ICOM Statutes". *International Council of Museums*.



3) Writing history

The best way for the historian to explore the sources and to show the results of his searches to the reader is the rational one. The rational or scientific method foresees different phases: hypothesis, experiment and thesis.

Hypothesis: at the beginning of his research, the historian shows his question and the way that he has used to interrogate the chosen sources. Documents have been produced in the past with different objectives compared to ours. That's why the historian must always interrogate the documents with a precise question, otherwise they will not answer to him (see [Chapter 1 - Building an Argument in Historical Research](#)).

Experiment: the historian guides the readers in the exploration of the sources, analysing them to verify his hypothesis.

Thesis: at the end of the journey across the documents, the historian exposes his conclusion.

During all his work, then, the historian has to keep in touch with his sources, primary and secondary, which are indeed the basis of his research and the only way for the readers to verify his conclusions.

For that reason the historian has to follow some rules concerning the quotation of the sources that he has used. Every historical essay has to include three elements:

- **Referencing.** Referencing is a standardised method of acknowledging the sources of information and ideas that you have used in your assignments and submissions. Referencing provides enough information for the reader to find the original source you have quoted or used;
- **Bibliography.** A bibliography, whose other technical name is "works cited", is a systematic list of books and other works such as reviews and articles, placed at the end of the work. It normally contains the secondary sources and all the printed works used in the research;
- **Webliography.** A webliography – or webography – is a list of websites that pertain to the topic. It is much like a bibliography, but is limited to a collection of online resources rather than books and academic journals.

All sources should be clearly cited in a paper. Many different styles of **referencing** can be used, based on in-text citation, in footnotes or endnotes. The most common and probably the easiest style, specially for the English literature, is the Chicago Guidelines (adopted in the papers contained in the section *Writing History on Line*, in this website).

The rules of the Chicago Style are contained in the *Chicago Manual of Style*. This method favours the so-called **author-date system**, whereby the author's name is followed by the date of publication in both the bibliography and the footnotes. The Chicago Guidelines foresees two levels of quotation:

1) In the text a short citation enclosed in parenthesis:

Surname of the author, year, page (if necessary).

e.g.: (Doniger 1999, 65).

2) The short citations are amplified in a list of references at the end of the paper, where full bibliographic information is provided:

e.g.: Doniger, Wendy. 1999. *Splitting the difference*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

A description of all the cases is available at http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html.





In all the referencing styles bibliography and webliography are at the end of the work.
An entry for a book in a bibliography usually contains the following information:

- author(s);
- title;
- publisher;
- date of publication.

An entry for a journal or periodical article usually contains:

- author(s);
- article title;
- journal title;
- volume;
- pages;
- date of publication.

A bibliography may be arranged by author, topic, or some other scheme.

Systematic lists of media other than books can be referred to with terms formed analogously to bibliography:

- Webliography (websites);
- Discography (recorded music);
- Filmography (films).



Lifelong Learning Programme

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission.
This material reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.





Further reading

LE GOFF Jacques: *Histoire et mémoire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1977.
MOMIGLIANO, Arnaldo: *The Classical Foundation of Modern Historiography*, Berkeley, University of California press, 1990.
LE ROY LADURIE, Emmanuel: *Parmi les historiens*, Paris, Gallimard, 1984.
BURKE, Peter (dir): *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991.
ZANNI ROSIELLO, Isabella: *Gli archivi nella società contemporanea*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2009.
TREVISAN, Myriam: *Gli archivi letterari*, Roma, Carocci, 2009.
BANDINI, Gianfranco and BIANCHINI, Paolo (dirs.): *Fare storia in rete. Fonti e modelli di scrittura digitale per la storia dell'educazione, la storia moderna e la storia contemporanea*, Roma, Carocci, 2007.
AA.VV., *Guida generale degli Archivi di Stato italiani*, 4 voll., Roma, Ist. Poligrafico dello Stato, 1981-94.
CAVALLO Guglielmo: *Le biblioteche nel mondo antico e medievale*, Bari, Laterza, 2004.
POIRRIER, Philippe: *Introduction à l'historiographie*, Paris, Belin, 2009.

External links:

[International Council on Archives \(http://www.ica.org/\)](http://www.ica.org/)
[Online-Guide to Archives around the globe \(http://www.archivesmadeeasy.org/\)](http://www.archivesmadeeasy.org/)
[Lib-web-cats: A directory of over 39.000 worldwide libraries spanning 139 countries \(http://www.librarytechnology.org/libwebcats/\)](http://www.librarytechnology.org/libwebcats/)
[International Council of Museums \(http://icom.museum/\)](http://icom.museum/)
[History of Historiography \(http://www.cisi.unito.it/stor/home.htm\)](http://www.cisi.unito.it/stor/home.htm)