DOING HISTORY:
DEALING WITH SOURCES AND INTERPRETATIONS

Lecture

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> *'History free of all values cannot be written. Indeed, it is a concept almost impossible to understand, for men will scarcely take the trouble to inquire laboriously into something which they set no value upon.'* (W.H.B. Court)
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> *'… the man who can approach past events with a complete air of neutrality has no sense of history.'*[1]

Three meanings of 'history'

In everyday speech we use the term 'history' in different ways.

First of all, it refers to the reality of the past: the totality of all events, acts and processes which have happened.

The second meaning of history concerns common-sense historical awareness which is more or less familiar for everybody: the personal or collective memory of the past as part of making sense of our experiences and the world we live in. A notion of the past is crucial for a sense of continuity, orientation and meaning in human life, for an answer to the question where we come from and where we are going, or, in other words, for what our (personal or collective) identity is. Historical memory provides explanation and justification of our present situation as well as a perspective on and guide for the future. It provides an existential sense of stability and certainty. The way we draw on the past for a sense of continuity, identity and direction in our lives may be based on enquiry and factual knowledge, but it is subjective and partial, and at least to a certain degree grounded in imagination, belief, ideology, wishful thinking and mythmaking.

The third meaning of 'history' concerns history as an intellectual pursuit and scholarly discipline: the systematic enquiry into the past according to certain (scientific and academic) rules and methods. The reconstruction of the past in (published) narrative and analytic accounts should be open to empirical verification: it should be possible to check the factual statements and verify the arguments. The focus of this introduction is on some of the characteristics and problems of history as a scholarly pursuit and its relation to history as the reality of the past.

[1] Marwick, Arthur (1976). *The Nature of History*. London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, p. 162.

History as a never ending discussion

It is crucial to distinguish 'history' as the reality of the past in itself from 'history' as the reconstruction and representation of that past, either in a common-sense way in memory or in scholarly enquiry and historiography. The object of memory and historiography, the reality of the past, has disappeared forever. The past does not present itself 'as it really was'. That reality has only left imperfect, incomplete, fragmentary and more or less accidental traces (historical sources). This implies that 'truth' and 'objectivity' are problematic criteria in history and that there is not a clear-cut dividing line between professional history and history as subjective memory. Publishers like to advertise their books as 'the definitive work' about a certain subject, but qualifying historical studies as such is dubious. The Dutch historian Pieter Geyl stated that historiography is 'a never-ending discussion'. Definitive results – 'solid conclusions' in his words – cannot be expected from historians. As Geyl explains, the historian is unable to tell a story about the past, to present a coherent account of it without taking position on the basis of choice, judgement and perspective. In other words, historiography inevitably involves subjective interpretation. A historian – 'a man sitting at his desk' according to Geyl – may believe that his interpretation of the past is the most likely or even the only one that is credible and makes sense, but nevertheless any account of the past depends on a particular viewpoint which may differ from that of other historians, and which may be brought up for discussion. Geyl underlined his point by demonstrating in a voluminous study that successive generations of French historians have pictured and judged Napoleon in many different ways.[2]

Geyl's view on historiography as interpretative and therefore provisional is now a truism among academic historians. For them it is self-evident that historical interpretations have to be put in perspective. While a large part of the lay public still assumes that historians can and should describe the reality of the past 'how it was really like', in the words of the nineteenth-century German historian Leopold von Ranke, professional historians do not believe that an absolutely true account of the past is possible. Only simple, factual descriptions are undisputed, such as: 'On July 14, 1789 the people of Paris stormed the Bastille' or 'On January 30, 1933 Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany'. However, even such apparently 'hard' and self-evident historical facts can be (and are) depicted in different ways. Compare the statements: 'On January 21, 1793 Louis XVI, King of France by the grace of God, was killed by the revolutionaries' and 'On January 21, 1793 the citizen Louis Capet, found guilty of high treason, was executed'. Both descriptions of the death of Louis XVI contain a political view (opposing or defending the revolution) and a value-judgement about the French Revolution (an act of killing versus an act of justice). Such different depictions of the death of Louis XVI are not only to be found in historical works, but possibly also in historical sources, for example in the diaries of two French citizens who witnessed the beheading of Louis on January 21, 1793.

The writing of history is not a mere listing of 'facts'; that would be a mere chronicle without much understanding and explanation. Elucidating how facts are related to each other and describing and explaining them in a broader context is an essential

[2] Geyl, Pieter (1947). *Napoleon. Voor en tegen in de Franse geschiedschrijving*. Utrecht: Oosthoek, 2d ed. 1947. *Napoleon, For and Against*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

task of the historian. In their accounts of the past, historians demonstrate connections between facts, and they bestow meaning on facts by including them in a specific interpretative framework and narrative. Such connections, meanings, interpretations and stories, which are related to evaluations and judgements, inevitably give rise to differences of opinion among historians. Objective truths and definitive conclusions cannot be established. Historians seem to be less worried about the lack of cognitive stability and certainty in their field than other social and cultural scholars, even though for them the matter is basically not very different. History (like sociology and cultural studies) is a very broad and hybrid discipline which is part of the humanities as well as of the social sciences. It covers many dimensions of human existence - politics, economics, social relations, culture, religion, mentalities, science, and technology in a local, national as well as global context – and it includes a great variety of theories, interpretations and perspectives.

There are historical controversies in all shapes and sizes and about all kinds of subjects, and some of them continue for a long time. For instance, the discussion among historians about the nature of medieval society and culture dates from at least the eighteenth century. Were the Middle Ages a 'backward' period, as many Enlightenment thinkers believed, or can the beginning of modernity already be found in this period, as romantic historians asserted? This question has resulted in famous historical works, such as Jacob Burckhardt's classical study *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860), which was a reaction to romantic historiography. According to Burckhardt, the cradle of modern civilisation can be found in Renaissance Italy, where important features of medieval culture were superseded by a new way of looking at the world. In their response to Burckhardt other historians tried to demonstrate that the Italian Renaissance was not a new beginning, but that there were similar medieval intellectual and artistic achievements. In his turn, the famous Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, in his classic work *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen* (*The Waning of the Middle Ages*, 1919), challenged the image of the Late Middle Ages as the origin of the modern age. And thus, the debate went on.

Other debates, for example about the French Revolution, which was a defining moment in the history of the French nation, or Germany's role in the turbulent history of the first half of the twentieth century, with its two World Wars, Nazism and the Holocaust, touch on more current political issues and therefore they have involved a larger audience than the historical debate about the Middle Ages among academic scholars. Since historical debates may involve present-day issues and political viewpoints, they can be traced not only in academic books and professional journals, but also in more widely-read newspapers and magazines. That does, however, not alter the fact that any historical work, also without causing publicity, can be part of a historical controversy.

Critical debate belongs to the core of the historical profession: historians scrutinize each other's interpretations of the past. Since interpretation is inevitable in historiography and any interpretation of the past can be brought up for discussion, historians may find themselves, sooner or later, in the middle of a debate. Historians cannot provide certainties like 'this, and only this, is how it was'. In fact, the most interesting historical works are those which present views on the past that question received opinion and the self-evident view of reality. One of the essential tasks of historians is raising doubts, challenging common sense opinions, confronting

established views, demystifying misrepresentations of the past and providing new, more credible and convincing interpretations of it. A good historian is a critic and a sceptic, who contributes to the continuing debate and the variety of opinions in a pluralistic society. In this respect the nature of historiography resembles the essence of modern democracy: an endless debate about issues on the basis of different values, beliefs, ideologies and worldviews.

As long as historians do not contradict the empirical evidence provided by the available remnants of the past (the sources), there is no absolute touchstone in historiography for establishing what is true and false: different points of view can be equally defensible and for that reason many historical debates remain inconclusive (another similarity with democratic debates). Moreover, in scholarly debate as elsewhere, it is often difficult to separate arguments from the person who is putting them forward. Therefore, in historical debates not only the persuasive strength of the historian's arguments, narrative, style and imagery is put to the test, but his or her authority and reputation and perhaps academic position as well. Again, there is a resemblance with the workings of modern mass democracy, in which the personality of politicians, their charisma and ideological conviction, is important for their persuasiveness and authority.

The historical method: the critical study of sources

All of this does not take away that historians (and at least part of the general public) believe in their discipline as a scientific-academic endeavour. The writing of history is not the same as the writing of fiction because academic historiography is constrained by the requirement of empirical underpinning, which puts limits on the range of possible interpretations. The impossibility of absolute certainty in historiography does not rule out the possibility of comparing different interpretations with each other and assessing their relative merits and credibility. Historiography may well be a never-ending discussion, but it is also a discussion among scholars and intellectuals in which pieces of evidence are demonstrated, arguments are exchanged, and in which some viewpoints may be more convincing and credible than others.

Above all, historical interpretations should be empirically based on a thorough and critical study of sources and these sources should be referred to (usually in footnotes) in (published) historical accounts. In this way historical research is open to critical verification and further queries. Before the nineteenth century, writing about the past was not considered as part of science, since it often relied on narrative art and was associated with fictional literature and even myth. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, when historiography was established as an academic discipline at universities – Leopold von Ranke was one of the leading pioneers[3] – the use of primary sources and the correct way of processing them, is the hallmark of serious

[3] Von Ranke was also one of the pioneers of *Historismus* (historicism), the approach of the past which stipulated that it should be studied in terms of continuous change, as process, and for its own sake, that is according to its own views and values. 'Presentism' (anachronism) should be avoided. The historian should attempt to view the past through the eyes of historical actors whose thoughts, values, motives, priorities, fears and hopes were different from our own. The historian's task was to uncover the otherness and strangeness of the past and understand this 'foreign country' by placing it in the appropriate historical setting. Putting pieces of information about the past in its wider context was considered essential: a sense of the whole should guide the historian's understanding of the parts, and this required broad knowledge of the past as well as empathy and imagination.

historical research. In order to assess the veracity, authenticity and reliability of these sources, the so-called 'historical-critical method' has been elaborated. In order to explain the nature and difficulties of this method we should know what historical sources are about.

Sources are the raw materials of the historian. In general, they are the traces or remnants left behind from the past (texts, but also pictures, archaeological relicts, architectural and industrial remains, and other artefacts, and oral testimonies). For most historians written and printed texts are the main sources: the largest part of their research takes place in archives and libraries. To assess the usefulness of a particular source, nineteenth-century historians highlighted two criteria: (1) its *temporal and spatial proximity or distance* to the events, acts, situations or views it refers to, and (2) whether or not the source was *intended* to give an account of the past for a particular audience.

If the source somehow was the direct and contemporaneous (by)product of the reality it documented and if it was not intended as a report or commentary for later use and a later (implicit or explicit) purpose, it was supposed to be a more or less accurate reflection of the past.[4] Such a source was considered to be the best historical equivalent to eye-witness information; it closely approached the past 'how it really was', as Von Ranke phrased it.

However, historians may also use documents with information about past events which were drafted some time after these events had happened. If there was a considerable distance in time between the actual events in the past and the reporting about it, historians should consider that the indirect information in such a source could be coloured or even distorted by subjectivity, bias and particular interests and intentions of the authors. Therefore, such a source would be considered less valuable and reliable.

Nineteenth-century German historians labelled the direct sources as *Überreste* ('relics' or 'leftovers': contemporaneous and unintended traces and remains from the past) and the indirect ones as *Tradition* (derived from the Latin term *tradere* meaning 'to hand down to posterity'; 'tradition' in the sense of accounts which date from later in time and which may be coloured by customary ways of viewing reality or by certain motives, values and purposes). Today, historians usually talk about *primary sources* instead of *Überreste* and *secondary sources* instead of *Tradition*.[5]

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[4] Examples of primary (written) sources are laws and regulations, contracts, charters and treaties, bureaucratic and diplomatic records, administrative files, memoranda, minutes and proceedings of assemblies, conferences and meetings, party manifestos and programmes, speeches, petitions, pamphlets, broadsheets, opinion polls, census reports and other public opinion sources, diaries, letters and other correspondence, municipal and parish registers, criminal and medical records, statistics and demographic tables, financial accounts, cash-books, inventories and ledgers, notarial contracts and testaments, and works of art. Secondary sources are often published texts, such as newspapers, periodicals and journals, memoirs, (auto-)biographies, reference works, annals and chronicles, and also other historical works which the historian may consult as a source of information about the past.

[5] See Marwick, Arthur (1989). *The nature of history*. Houndmills, New York: Palgrave, pp. 208-228.

The differentiation of primary and secondary sources, however, is not always clear-cut. For instance, some types of sources usually considered as primary ones, sometimes include intentions: speeches, diaries, letters and pamphlets may be contemporaneous with the events, but don't provide neutral information. Newspapers on the other hand, usually listed as secondary sources, may well be considered primary sources for the historian of public opinion. Memoirs should be considered as secondary sources with respect to the events related in it, but they can also be read as primary sources if they provide first-hand information on the thoughts, motives and character of the author. Historical works produced in the past can also be viewed as primary sources when they are used to understand the judgements and values of the author, in particular if these reflect the spirit of times, the political climate or the ideological outlook of the period. Whether a source is either primary or secondary depends to a large extent on the specific research-question and purpose of the historian who uses it.

An example of an historical source which can be used as a primary as well as a secondary source is the book *The conditions of the English Working Class* (1845) by Friedrich Engels, the companion of Karl Marx. Suppose that the historian's research-question would be: what were the living conditions of English factory workers in the 1840s? Apart from eye-witness accounts of what Engels observed himself during his visits to industrial towns, in the light of the research-question, his study is largely a secondary source. Firstly, Engels based himself on primary sources (government reports, surveys, statistics, and newspapers) and therefore his account is 'secondary', mediated by his selection and interpretation of these primary sources. Secondly, Engels wrote his report with a political purpose in mind: exposing the evils of capitalism and the exploitation of workers, which might involve exaggeration and distortion. Engels's book, however, may serve as a primary source from the perspective of another question: one about his particular perspective and terminology: what was the intellectual contribution of Engels to the development of historical materialism and the thinking of Marx?

The fundamental value of primary sources for historical research does not imply that secondary sources - such as reference works, historical articles and monographs - are of minor importance. On the contrary, they usually are the starting point for research. More often than not historical research begins with questions and criticism, which are raised in historiography. As historian Gary Kates writes in the introduction of a volume about different interpretations of the French Revolution: 'Without a rigorous historiography that compels us to think critically about our approaches, our political views, and our rhetorical strategies, we would have only our prejudices and our passions on which to rely.'[6] Furthermore, secondary sources contain useful information about the general context of a specific historical phenomenon and offer an overview of accepted knowledge. 'Without historiography', according to Kates, 'scholars would not know to go about their business. […] We would be like travellers lost in a forest without a map.'[7] Finally, although primary sources are fundamental to researching history, this does not mean that they are always and necessarily more reliable than secondary sources. Therefore, secondary sources cannot and should

[6] Kates, Gary (2006). Introduction. In: *The French Revolution. Recent debates and new controversies* (pp. 1-14, quote on p. 12). New York/London: Routledge.
[7] Kates 2006, p. 12.

not be ignored or undervalued, although primary sources are the core of historical research.

The enquiry into the past on the basis of original source material entails all sorts of difficulties, intellectual as well as practical. The specific method of historians involves the ways in which they deal with these problems. It involves six basic steps: (1) tracing, (2) accessing, (3) selecting, (4) authenticating, (5) assessing, and (6) understanding and contextualizing sources. The first two are *heuristic* (the Greek concept *heuriskein* means to find; here: tracing and accessing sources) and the others can be characterised as *critical* (judging and understanding the relevance and contents of sources). Sources have to be approached with great caution. Treat every source circumspectly, take nothing for true just on trust, is the credo of the historian.

(ad. 1) Relevant sources about a particular historical subject have to be *traced* in archives and possible other locations. To make an informed guess about this, some prior knowledge (for example being familiar with the available historiography) about that subject is required.

(ad. 2) Sources have to be *accessed*. Having traced relevant archives, institutions or individuals possessing sources, the next step is to get admission to them. Many archives and institutions are publicly accessible, but that does not imply that all documents are open to everybody. In many countries, for example, governments do not release their records before a certain period of time (sometimes thirty years or even more) has passed. Another difficulty may be that records are not catalogued and/or, for a variety of reasons, not open for the public and that permission has to be asked of (possibly unwilling) authorities and administrators or (possible private) owners (who may fear for their reputation if certain information pops up and is published). If a Dutch historian wants to study documents that are in the Archive of the Royal Family, permission has to be obtained from the king (and in that case the historian who is well-known for his or her republican sympathies may have a problem). Furthermore, reading unpublished and possibly handwritten documents in archives may require quite some effort, time, resources and command of unusual handwritings and languages. On the other hand, sources may also be available as transcribed, reprinted (and sometimes translated) documents in published and annotated collections, and increasingly, in digital data bases and online.

(ad. 3) Usually a *selection* has to be made from a multitude of archival material. Although sources may be scarce, for example when doing research into ancient history or the Middle Ages, in most cases historians of the modern era will be often confronted with an overwhelming amount and variety of documents. They first have to make a well-considered choice from the source material, selecting those documents which they expect or hope will throw light on their subject, help them to answer their research-question and underpin their argument and interpretation.

(ad. 4) Establishing whether a source is *authentic* or not, that is finding out whether it was really created at the time and place of the historical event(s), happening(s) or situation it refers to, and not fabricated (or even forged) afterwards with particular purposes. Being able to judge the authenticity of historical sources and verify the context of their creation was particularly needed for older, classical and medieval sources. For example, in order to establish the authenticity of a medieval charter (in

which a ruler grants rights or privileges to a town or a group of people), the historian has to be familiar with the characteristic material forms of such documents, the script used, the style of language and the legal forms which were usual at the time in which it originated. Therefore, a whole range of auxiliary technical disciplines (for example chemical testing in order to determine the age of parchment, paper or ink) was developed to facilitate this. (Nowadays historians should also be aware of the fact that digitally produced texts and images can easily and imperceptibly be manipulated.) It is necessary to ascertain whether a source is original or copied and complete or incomplete. A copy in itself is not automatically unreliable, but if it is not an exact and/or complete duplicate, there is reason for further investigation. The same applies if something has been deleted from or added to a (copied or original) source after it has been created.

The authenticity of a source, which concerns its factual origin and production, is not the same as the truthfulness and reliability of its contents. An authentic source can be full of distortions and biased information. For example, Adolf Hitler's, *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle*, 1925), which is full of subjective views and political propaganda, is an authentic source because it is a fact that Hitler dictated the text during his imprisonment after a failed coup and that this text was published as a book in 1925. On the other hand, the so-called *Hitler Diaries*, which the German magazine bought in 1983 in the belief that they were original and would provide first-hand information about Hitler's private thoughts, appeared to be a fabricated forgery. The diaries were not authentic and therefore worthless as an historical source.

(ad. 5) The reliability and information value of sources has to be *assessed* analytically and critically. Historians should be trained sceptics who do not believe at face-value what is conveyed in sources, as long as they have not checked and verified their reliability and credibility.[8] The only way to do this is by asking and answering questions about the contemporary meaning of a particular source. Why was it produced at a particular time and place? What was its function? What person or group of persons or institution produced the source and what was their position? To what extent was/were the author(s) of the document able to provide first-hand information on the reported events or situation? How well-informed was/were (s)he/they about them? Was (s)he/were they involved in the reported happenings and if so, what does this imply with regard to the credibility of the source? Can all the information in the source be taken at face-value or is it (completely or partly) biased, one-sided and/or distorted, and for what reason? Was there a particular intention to create the document? What basic attitudes, judgements, prejudices and vested interests may the author(s) have had? Does his/her/their viewpoint represent a broader perspective? Was the source aimed at a particular audience and if so, what does this mean for its perspective and reliability? These questions boil down to the

[8] Already the famous ancient Greek historian Thucydides (454-404 BC), one of the first to write political history, stated in his classical work on the Peloponnesian War: '…with regard to my factual reporting of the events of the war I have made it a principle not to write down the first story that came my way, and not even to be guided by my own general impressions; either I was present myself at the events which I have described or else I heard of them from eye-witnesses whose reports I have checked with as much thoroughness as possible. Not even in this manner the truth was easy to discover: different eye-witnesses give different accounts of the same events, speaking out of partiality for one side or the other or else from imperfect memories.' (Thucydides (1972), *History of the Peloponnesian War*, transl. Rex Warner. Harmondsworth: Penguin, p. 48)

historian's fundamental task to gather reliable information from the available sources and to establish the 'facts'. The findings in the sources are the historian's building stones for (re)constructing the reality of the past in a credible way, for answering his/her research-question and for underpinning his/her interpretation. To increase the reliability of their information historians should examine as many pieces of evidence as possible. Mastery of a variety of sources is one of the hallmarks of historical scholarship.

(ad. 6) Sources have to be *understood* properly by *contextualizing* them. Historians have to comprehend the (often archaic) language of the documents, not only in the literal sense of just being able to read and analyse the either printed or handwritten texts internally, but also reading 'between the lines', that is grasping the wider, external meaning of the contents: to what these refer to and how these are related to other sources and to social, political, economic and/or cultural realities. The historian has to ascertain which conditions, circumstances and developments in the past are relevant to understand the broader significance of a source. *Contextualisation*, that is putting source-texts in the appropriate setting, is crucial for the historian's ability to use them as building blocks for a persuasive historical argument.

Historiography as construction

The historian's work is comparable to that of the criminal investigator in several ways. Both try to ascertain 'what really happened' on the basis of some more or less accidentally left traces. Both try to reconstruct 'the facts' and how these are interrelated. Both try to discover motives (of historical actors respectively suspects) and find causal links. For both empirical accuracy and deductive and imaginative powers are vital. However, at the end of the investigation – in spite of the accurate and intelligent way it may have been carried out – historians are at a disadvantage. Unlike criminal investigators, who can interrogate witnesses and suspects and may incite them to confess and tell the truth, historians are unable to check their reconstruction of what really happened by interrogating historical actors and forcing a confession from them about the 'truth' of the past. It is precisely because of this impossibility to receive direct empirical 'feedback' from the reality of the past that some historians prefer to speak of 'constructing' rather than '*re*constructing' the past. Unlike natural scientists – to make another comparison – historians cannot carry out a repeatable experiment in controlled laboratory conditions in order to test and, if necessary, to adapt or revise their interpretation of 'how it really was'. The past is not like a laboratory. 'Replaying' the past like a motion picture in order to compare the historical narrative directly with historical reality, is, of course, not possible. We can only compare an historical account of the past indirectly, that is with other historical studies or with the remnants of the past, the sources. Furthermore, instead of experimenting, only *discussion* about the empirical foundations, the plausibility, and the coherence of interpretative historical (re)constructions is possible.

Historical interpretations cannot be verified by comparing it in a direct way with the reality of the past in itself, but only by checking the reliability and credibility of the sources to which historians refer and by examining whether they followed the historical method properly. This kind of testing cannot provide absolute certainty about the reality of the past since historical sources do not have a self-evident, fixed meaning. Sources restrict the range of possible interpretations, but that does not

imply that they fully determine how historians should understand and explain the past.

Apart from the fact that different sources referring to the same events or situations may be contradictory, they shed light on the past only in a certain selective way and from a specific perspective. Next to providing only fragmentary information, such documents may also be the result of institutional (for example bureaucratic and record-keeping procedures, administrative routines or diplomatic conventions) and more intentional (such as political-ideological beliefs, vested interests and reputations) one-sidedness or misrepresentation. Moreover, the sources which a historian finds, have already been selected by history itself: some parts of the past can be found back in sources, others have hardly left traces or none at all. Sources have got lost by accident (negligence, war, floods, fires) or they have been destroyed deliberately. For example, when in the summer of 1789 at the start of the French Revolution, all over France peasants rose against landlords and attacked mansions and castles, they burned many archives in order to obliterate the documents in which rents and feudal dues were recorded. There are much more sources which throw light on the thoughts and actions of rulers, princes, statesmen, aristocrats, clergymen, the rich and intellectuals than on the experiences and daily lives of the mass of 'ordinary' people. The 'winners' in history and those established institutions which were continuous in time, such as the state and the church, have left more traces than the 'losers' and 'passers-by'. We know more about the Romans than about the peoples and tribes they defeated and subjected, and what we know about the latter is mediated through what the Romans wrote down about them. What we know about the Middle Ages relies largely on texts written by the clergy or literate members of the ruling class. Such texts suggest that medieval society was dominated by Christianity, but how can we be sure if the voices of ordinary people can hardly be heard in written sources? Were people in medieval times really as religious as the clerical sources tell us?

The oldest and main record-keeping institutions in Western society are church and state, which had the means to register all that was of interest to them (and to ignore what was not of interest to them) and to store documents. What we know about common people has often been filtered through the lens of powerful and literate elites as well as through the lens of the extraordinary. As long as daily life was business as usual, there was no need or reason to record something about it. Only when something unusual happened, in particular activities that triggered the attention of authorities (an offense, a crime, a conflict, non-conformity, rebellion, recalcitrant thoughts) and the state or church intervened, the lives of ordinary people were documented. Criminal records and police reports or the archives of ecclesiastical courts and the Inquisition – the institution of the Catholic Church that prosecuted heresy – may throw light on ordinary lives in the past which under normal conditions would not have left a trace.

The British historian Richard Cobb, who was an expert of the French Revolution and nineteenth-century France and defined his principal task as the attempt to make the dead alive, wrote a book about ordinary people in nineteenth century Paris (*Death in Paris*, 1978) on the basis of police reports about dead bodies found in the Seine. A famous historical study on the lives of ordinary people in the Middle Ages is Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village,*

1294-1324 (1976). Why was this historian able to gather information about the inhabitants of an insignificant village in the south of France? Because the people in the region were so-called Cathars, followers of a heresy which the Catholic Church and the French king considered as a threat to Christian orthodoxy and the social order. The people in the village were subjected to an investigation by the Inquisition, which was documented and for that reason we have detailed information about their way of thinking, their habits and the social relations in the village. Another example is Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (1976), an in-depth portrait of the Italian miller Mennochio, a man of wide reading, who was prosecuted and interrogated extensively by the Inquisition for his unorthodox religious views. For Ginzburg the records of the prosecution (which ended in a death-sentence) and the texts which had inspired the miller provided a unique opportunity to reconstruct the mentality of Mennochio and kindred spirits, and to throw light on popular culture. The information in the sources which Cobb, Le Roy Ladurie and Ginzburg used for their reconstructions of the lives of ordinary people in the past, is, of course, colored, by the extraordinary occasion (unusual deaths and heresy) which triggered the recordings, but at the same time they do provide useful information about people in the past.

Sources are not direct, unproblematic reflections of past reality, but they are selective interpretations by historical actors and as such influenced by judgements, subjective perspectives, framing, distortion, bias, convictions, power relations and interests. The historian has to evaluate and assess, that is again interpret, such interpretations. Many sources can be and are understood in various ways by historians. Moreover, they may make different selections from available sources on the basis of diverse views about their significance and importance, and they may relate their contents to other sources and the historical context in dissimilar ways. Historical debates often spring from a reconsideration and reassessment of sources. As long as a historical interpretation is not in flagrant contradiction with the information in sources, a source in itself cannot finally prove or refute that interpretation.

As readers of historical works, we don't get direct access to the reality of the past, but we are offered a certain perspective on it, a viewpoint that has been shaped by selection and interpretation in two ways. Firstly, primary sources were the result of the particular ways in which they were produced and as such they were framed, either intentionally or not by historical actors. Secondly, the narrative and analytic accounts of the past by historians, which are based on primary and secondary sources, are their particular selections and interpretations of these sources. We cannot know the past in a direct way. Historical interpretations cannot be verified by the reality of the past itself because it has vanished forever and cannot be 'replayed' like a motion picture. The historian's account of the past is not a true picture, an exact mirror image of some past reality, but rather a suggestion to look at and understand the past in a certain way.