Historical Research and the Problem of Sources

Syllabus

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(Letter by an official of the Italian Army during the Italo-Ethiopian War, Ethiopia, 26 November 1936)

I Semester: 2021/2022

Schedules:

10 November 2021, 9:00-11:00
15 November 2021, 9:00-11:00
22 November 2021, 9:00-11:00
3 December 2021, 17:00-19:00
6 December 2021, 9:00-11:00
13 December 2021, 9:00-11:00
last lesson tbd (January)
Description

The course consists of 7 two-hour lessons. Each meeting is composed of two parts: the first part consists of seminar-type lessons during which instructors develop a series of arguments on the approach to historical sources and discuss with the students; in the second part, PhD students (and possibly undergraduates) discuss the suggested readings.

General objectives: the course deals with historical sources, considering them in their variety and analyzing the possible interpretative problems their use raise. The main purpose of the course is to equip PhD students with a minimum "toolbox" to deal with the problems that the historian faces in identifying and interpreting the sources.

Organization of the course: the course consists of two parts. In the first block of 3 lessons, the general problems of the critique of sources will be discussed with the students through a series of examples and with the help of some classic readings on the historical method. Then, in the second block, the lessons will focus on four specific issues: the sources and method for transnational history; the police sources; the legal sources, with particular reference to the study of the history of public law; the sources for the study of Soviet history. During these meetings, the students will be able to interact with historians from different generations who specialize in particular fields of historical research and with different types of historical sources.

Readings: A few general readings are required for the course and some special readings are required for each lesson. Part of the materials is available online via the digital library or provided by the instructors in a shared SSM folder, or, in paper, at university libraries.

Students will be required to prepare a paper that will be discussed at the end of the course. The papers must be submitted by 28 January 2022. The papers' presentations will take place on two consecutive days of February 2022.

Evaluation:
1. Attendance and participation in the discussion on the topics of the lessons and suggested readings: 50%
2. Presentation in class: 20%
3. Brief final essay (between 4000 and 6000 words) based on the analysis of specific sources and on the methodological problems they pose, as well as on the reflections addressed during the course (the topic must be agreed upon with the teacher by 18 December): 30%

General readings:


These readings are required. Translations are admitted.
Lessons

Lesson 1: Critique of sources
The first lesson aims at introducing the problem of historical critique and critique of sources. Through concrete examples, some classical historiographical reflections will be proposed on the problem of the relationship between the historian and the sources.

Topics:
- what is a historical source? From positivism to the criticism of the twentieth century
- branches of history/plurality and identification of sources
- question a source: the questionnaire
- the relationship between the historian and the sources
- sources’ deceptions: some examples
- the intertwining of different sources
- an example of “historiographical crux”**: the problem of consent in an authoritarian regime

Readings:

Lesson 2: The relationship between the historian and the sources
The second lesson provides elements for a reflection on the complex relationship that binds the historian to the sources, examining, in particular, the passage represented by twentieth-century historiographical critique as a fundamental moment in historiography.

Topics:
- the historiographical revolution of Les Annales
- the activity of judging and historical understanding
- history as contemporary history
- la longue durée - the return of the event
- what is an anachronism?

Readings:
Lesson 3: History as a discipline of the context
The lesson focuses on the relationship between history and other disciplines and focuses in particular on the idea of history as a discipline of the context.

Topics:
• trends in social history and cultural history
• a story of continuity?
• relations with other disciplines: enrichments and problems
• history as a discipline of the context

Readings:

Lesson 4: Narrating Constitution: the constitutional preambles as particular types of historical source.
Prof. Luigi Lacchè (Università di Macerata / LUISS ‘G. Carli’ Roma)
The lesson aims at presenting a special type of historical source, namely the preambles of different lengths and intensity, that precede the articles of a constitution. After a general introduction, particular attention will be paid to the so-called 'granted Constitutions' (1814-1848) analyzed in the light of the concepts of political Restoration and legal transition

Topics:
• Comparative constitutional history as a space of communication
• What is a constitutional preamble?
• Structure and contents
• Functions: performative vocation; identity (We the People); historical dimension; principles; references to the transcendent
• An example: how to constitutionalize the post-revolutionary political regimes. The category of 'Granted constitutions' (1814-1848)

Readings:
Lesson 5: The "Space of the Flows": Conceptualizing Interactions in the Modern World
Elena Bacchin (Università di Venezia Cà Foscari)

Spurred by processes of globalization, Transnational history has recently emerged as a perspective in the analysis of the past, highlighting the role of spatialities, scales of analysis and connections. The seminar will introduce some debates concerning the methodology, the normative implications of the field, and the role and use of primary sources.

Topics:
- The emergence of transnational history
- A perspective with distinct approaches
- The relationship between primary sources and secondary literature
- Themes and examples
- Risks

Readings:

Lesson 6: Navigating police sources
Laura Di Fiore (Università di Napoli Federico II)

The lesson aims at introducing the international historiography on police, which grew in recent decades. Through examples of different typologies of documents, issues and problems related to police sources will be addressed.

Topics:
- what is the police? Origins of the modern police
- the international police history
- the peculiarity of police sources
- police and law: discretion and governmentality
- the example of the circulars
- identification and classification documents
- when the sources lie: secret agents' reports

Readings:
3. I. About, “Qu’est-ce qu’un système policier? Le voyage de Raymond B. Fosdick à travers
Lessons 7: Assessing the Soviet Sources' Characteristics, Riches and Biases
Prof. Andrea Graziosi (Università di Napoli Federico II)

The seminar aims at assessing the nature, the value, and the peculiar biases of Soviet sources, trying at the same time to understand what they tell us about the regime and the groups that produced them, as well as about the population that these sources “observed”.

Topics:
- Soviet sources and Soviet history
- What the Soviet sources tell about, and how they reflect the Soviet system's peculiarities
- Soviet sources' characteristics
- How Soviet sources changed our vision of Soviet history

Reading: