

**A discussion of  
historical sources  
and the problems  
posed by them.**

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The interpretation of past events in the study of history inevitably requires that historical sources be studied in order to gain a much fuller understanding of an event or timeframe which will thus lead to a much better developed interpretation. In this sense, the study of history is interwoven with the search for sources from which to base, and develop, interpretations from. Without sources a history is almost worthless as it cannot hope to have the same reliability, or even understanding, as a well researched piece of work because differing viewpoints are not synthesised or challenged, leaving an argument bare both perhaps factually and intellectually. Sources then are the building blocks of history from which historians can make choices in order to build an individual interpretation of an event but they must be approached in a neutral fashion so that sources with conflicting accounts or arguments can all be considered to allow a fuller interpretation of events to occur. The historian must be mindful though of what is relevant to their own work so as not to use time which would perhaps have been better spent on better quality evidence, more relevant to the topic at hand as it would almost certainly prove impossible for one person to study and fully understand all of the evidence and sources that are available for a given event or timeframe in history. The point is that choices must be made and it is in how those choices are made, and why, that we find the foundation of well written histories. The decisions made in this regard can be vital and can bring about a balanced and well written history as opposed to a biased and perhaps self serving piece of work which could be constructed through the selective use of sources and closed interpretation of evidence. Today the range of sources that can be consulted is massive and all the more open due to the proliferation of digital journal sources, online newspaper and magazine archives and government documents that are now, in many cases, available instantly online. This relatively recent expansion of access to sources has made it possible for more informed histories to be written but the historians' decisions as regards source relevancy and reliability are now all the more important in this sense.

Without sources the study of the past would perhaps be impossible as without sources there is no basis or foundation for interpretations, or even straight laced narratives, to exist for as Marc Bloch wrote, '(the past) forbids them to know anything which it has not itself...yielded to them'<sup>1</sup>. Writing on past events requires that records of the past, in whatever form, be they official documents or thoughts from memory, actually exist. Sources provide the backbone of information needed to piece together the veritable jigsaw of history in a logical manner while historiography as an issue in and of itself, debates where those same pieces should be placed and in what order of importance. If a period of time has absolutely no sources then the historian could be quite sure that that period of time cannot be written about and while this may be a sweeping generalization, it should be kept in mind about what sources actually are in the broadest sense. When one thinks of sources it is generally books and documents that come to mind but the source base for many historical events and timeframes is often much wider than this and needs to be so due to the lack of more, so-called conventional, sources. Diary entries, newspaper articles, personal notes and personal memories of an event are all legitimate sources as are items that were never created with the intention of documenting periods in history but yet still hold important information for the investigative historian. The "rules of verification" which have been come down to us unscathed from the 1820s, when they were first laid down by...Leopold von Ranke<sup>2</sup> guide the historian in making judgements about whether a source can be deemed to primary or secondary and from there on to make decisions on the authenticity of the source, it's reliability as regards the facts and it's relevancy to the subject at hand. A primary source is

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Ziemann and Miriam Dobson, 'Introduction', in B. Ziemann and M. Dobson (eds.), *Reading Primary Sources: The interpretation of texts from nineteenth- and twentieth-century history* (London, 2009), p.91.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Ziemann and Miriam Dobson, 'Introduction', in B. Ziemann and M. Dobson (eds.), *Reading Primary Sources: The interpretation of texts from nineteenth- and twentieth-century history* (London, 2009), p.1.

one that ‘gives the words of the witnesses or first recorders of an event’<sup>3</sup> and allows then a secondary source to be constructed through the interpretation of those primary sources. Typically a primary source is a government document, parliamentary paper or indeed an article written by a person at the event that their article documents. Strong parallels can be drawn between live television images of an event and literal primary sources (this is not to say that a live television image is not a source itself). Secondary sources however are subject to the interpretation of primary sources and so they must be approached in a careful manner by historians. This is not to say that primary sources must not be approached in a careful manner and as such then the historian must ask certain questions of all sources, whether they are primary or secondary. Is the source legitimate and factually reliable? Is the source biased in order to construct a history favourable to a certain historian’s ideology or perhaps the ideology of a government or other archive or record owner? These are questions which must be posed to all sources or the historian runs the risk of starting or perpetuating a myth which would not be in keeping with Rankean historical rules. While queries about institutions and their function in the body politic are important as regards the production of primary source documents, historians must also be mindful of the process behind the production of sources and not just the sources as isolated from all else<sup>4</sup>. In this sense then the analysis of context, in keeping with the Annales tradition, is important as it questions why certain sources exist and what agenda lay behind them<sup>5</sup>. These overarching questions would also assist in answering queries of relevancy and reliability and thus help the historian to interpret documents in a better fashion for if questions are not asked then new discoveries, or new interpretations, may not be made. These question topics are relatively narrow in their scope, relying on the examination of the evidence derived from the source itself (e.g. a single document from an

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<sup>3</sup> Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, *The Modern Researcher* (New York, 1970), p.112.

<sup>4</sup> John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (London, 1984), p. 63.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Black and Donald M. MacRaild, *Studying History* (London, 1997), p. 67.

archive). Broader questions need to be asked to examine the context of the institution that produced the evidence and on top of this the historian also needs to have ‘a knowledge of administrative and archival procedures...to be alert to...the deliberate removal of evidence’<sup>6</sup>. While this constitutes to the elimination of sources the elimination itself actually provides the historian with clues as to the workings, and ideology, of an institution and its involvement in whatever that historian is studying. In a sense the elimination becomes a pseudo source leading to more questions further on.

In the field of study that concerns this writer’s thesis a broad range of both primary and secondary sources must be consulted in order to investigate as fully as possible, the effects of the Cold War on culture and design in 1950s America. It is not an exactly defined, or perhaps even relatively well developed topic of study in and of itself but sources are in abundance about the context of the time and indeed also on design and culture. The linkage of these with the Cold War of the time is, however, one that is sparse as regards sources but this does not automatically denote that the historian cannot make the linkage him/herself through the sources and evidence that are available. Primary source documents such as Presidential papers are freely available online as are foreign relations documents through the US State Department. Secondary sources such as journal articles are also freely available while there are many books that cover the topic of design and culture in 1950s America which can in themselves lead the historian to other sources through bibliographies. It should be noted that on the topic of design, subjectivity is much more apparent than objectivity although a distinction should be drawn between subjectivity and bias as separate concepts in

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<sup>6</sup> John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (London, 1984), p. 64.

this unconventional area of historical research<sup>7</sup>. Books and articles should be investigated for the usual blemishes such as ideological bias, factual reliability and overall relevancy but other sources such as magazine articles, newspaper articles, television adverts and photographs must all be examined thoroughly in order to not just detect bias but to actually embrace such blemishes as contextual elements in the overall history of the era. Documentary films produced by important corporations of the time such as General Motors or RCA often have inbuilt biases which is to be expected as ‘documentary film straddles the categories of fact and fiction’<sup>8</sup>. The bias that may be found only assists the historian in better understanding the context of the time and in this thesis subject area, what corporations, or other institutions, wanted people to think of them. Without a detectable bias then perhaps these sources would not be as useful as they possibly are. Magazine articles from such magazines as Life and Time, have to be seen as a product of the period and the structures behind them must also be considered when the historian is examining them but again any blemishes can be considered as positive additions to research. Without a good many sources that draw a clear link between the Cold War and the culture and design of the time, besides Thomas Hine’s pioneering book *Populuxe*, as broad a cross section of sources as possible must be investigated. This is so because more sources allow a more detailed picture of the period to be constructed and with this a better basis to investigate if a link between culture, design and the Cold War did indeed exist. Cross-disciplinary sources such as Jessamyn Neuhaus’ article *The Way To a Man’s Heart: Gender Roles, Domestic Ideology and Cookbooks in the 1950s*, while not specifically historical in a traditional sense do assist in historical research through research views on other sources such as television adverts of the time. These subtle linkages create a fuller palette from which the historian can then paint a more detailed picture.

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, *The Modern Researcher* (New York, 1970), p.112.

<sup>8</sup> Jill Godmillow, ‘How Real Is The Reality In Documentary Film?’, <http://www.nd.edu/~jgodmilo/reality.html>, (accessed 15/12/09).

Historical sources are the backbone of historical research and while sources can exist without research, research cannot exist without sources to find, at least to some extent. In saying this though it should be kept in mind that sources are many and varied and the historians mind should not be limited to what traditionally counts as a source and he/she should not be afraid to reach out to more and more pieces of evidence which can help to bring about more whole interpretations of historical events or timeframes. While the historian should always be on the lookout for bias and other flaws in sources, they should not be counted as flaws in the traditional sense of the word. These flaws give further clues as to the nature of the sources and the structure that lay behind their creation which then allows the historian to draw further on the context that a source was created in. If sources were always perfect and bias free then it may prove difficult to create a contextual history through a vibrant historiography as there would be little fuel for debates with all of the historical gaps filled. It is up to the historian however to find sources, examine them for their flaws and use them to create greater interpretations of history and to contribute to the greater overall narrative and knowledge of a time.

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