

**Forum: J. Hamburger: Source Criticism and the Dialogue between
Past and Present**

by Jeffrey F. Hamburger

The authors' call for competence is in effect an appeal to slow down. In a day and age in which it seems that every scholar, should he or she wish to establish their critical reputation, must call for yet another turn, to the point that one's head spins, and in which claims of methodological innovation, often made in the context of hard-fought competition for funding, have become so commonplace that the very idea of genuine innovation borders on becoming meaningless, stopping to consider our sources and how we approach them makes a good deal of sense. Without access to the sources, the collective anchor of historical inquiry, our investigations threaten to become rudderless, no less than they would be if we failed to consider historiography or methodology. It would be ironic indeed if precisely as more and more sources are made available through digitization and sifted via „Big Data“, our students' ability to analyze or even to read them were to disappear for lack of the will to invest in essential, if not necessarily the most sexy, skills that provide the bedrock of the historical disciplines.

It could, in fact, be argued that the humanistic disciplines in general are conservative by nature, if not by nature of their methods, which inevitably and necessarily change as the societies that shape historical inquiry and which are shaped by it in turn themselves undergo all manner of transformations, then because it is essential that means of access to certain forms of knowledge must be preserved if that knowledge is to be transmitted, let alone be reevaluated. Without languages, we cannot read foreign, let alone dead languages. Without paleography, we cannot read older scripts. Fighting with the German army on the Russian front in World War I, my grandfather kept diaries that I would love to read, but cannot, as they are written in German shorthand scripts that are as incomprehensible to me as they are to most German students today. Just recently the head of the research arm of Washington D.C.'s United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

told me that there are certain aspects of the subject's history that lack for students simply because they cannot read the handwriting in which the sources are written. And if this is true of twentieth-century sources, imagine the challenges for previous periods!

It is striking that the statement does not even once employ the term „Hilfswissenschaft“ to refer to those academic pursuits that, with some exceptions, were first fully developed in the German-speaking world and that, as the authors point out, to this day remain the source of considerable admiration (with, it must be added, a healthy admixture of skepticism regarding certain forms of neo-positivism). „Hilfswissenschaft,“ which in English has long since been used as a loan word to describe what otherwise are known as „auxillary sciences,“ suggests that such subjects as paleography, codicology, diplomatics, numismatics and the like are secondary in status, handmaidens to the full-fledged humanistic disciplines. Yet the term's absence from the statement is symptomatic of the fact that in the midst of what some have called the material turn – itself a reaction to the retreat of all things palpable and sensible into the flatlands of virtual space – what used to be considered auxillary disciplines have become independent areas of inquiry in their own right. Charters, documents, handwriting, epigraphy, manuscript glosses and many other material manifestations of the past provide fascinating embodiments of mediality and material culture. They are technologies in their own right, no less epochal than those that are transforming our own world. Our awareness of the ways in which the current media revolution is upending not just the quantity but also the quality of an ever-increasing flood of images and information as well as the ways in which human beings interact with it has sharpened our understanding of comparable moments in the past. Without this perspective, we may well be mastered by the media that we have created rather than remaining, as we should, their critical consumers. The choice is not or should not be between the new and the old, the innovative versus the conservative, but rather about how to rethink and reevaluate the old in terms of the new and, no less,

the new in terms of the old. Without this dialogue between past and present and the means to keep it alive, our sense of ourselves and our possibilities for the future will be greatly diminished.

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