Forum: G. Crane: Source Criticism in the Digital Age
von Gregory Crane

In responding to the position paper on source criticism in a digital age, I do so in my capacity as an Alexander von Humboldt Professor, a position formally charged with „enhancing Germany's sustained international competitiveness as a research location."[1] As the product of a foreign educational system, my job is to provide an external perspective within a more general conversation. I focus my comments in this short essay on my perspective to this position paper as an American working in a German university.

The position paper stresses two complementary challenges. On the one hand, the flood of Open Access data about the pre-modern and modern world has made some sources available for the first time (e.g., digitised archival materials that were difficult, sometimes impossible to access before) and other sources available in new ways (e.g., digitised print texts now available for text mining). At the same time, between 1997 and 2011, a third of the chairs responsible for such core capacities as Palaeography, Codicology, Epigraphy and Numismatics were cut in Germany. Even as millions of digitised sources in various formats become available, our ability to train students to contextualise, and to think critically about, those sources has been drastically and rapidly cut. In this context, the so-called *Digital Humanities* do not, of course, substitute for fundamental skills in analysing the past. Rather we need to be able to integrate new digital methods into our practices of study. We are trying to rethink source criticism in a digital age and, if we were to add a qualifier, I would distinguish the *Humanities* (which use every possible method) from the *Analog Humanities* (which restrict themselves to print models, such as the use of PDF and thus carrying the limitations of paper into the digital medium). The position paper also frames itself specifically in terms of the tradition and current international standing of German and Austrian scholarship.

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[1] <https://www.humboldt-foundation.de/web/alexander-von-humboldt-professorship.html>.

My PhD is in Classical Philology and my primary focus is on *Digital Philology,* i.e., what new things can we in a digital age do with the textual record to advance the intellectual life of society? I try to balance my own efforts on the use of Greek and Latin by working with colleagues with expertise in other historical languages (e.g., Classical Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, various ancient forms of Egyptian etc.). I am a newcomer to Germany and hope that my perspectives may be helpful – even if some of my perceptions are incorrect they may be useful in that they shed light on perspectives from outside of Germany.

The Digital Turn and Open Data
Emerging digital methods, first and foremost, challenge us to rethink how we can help contribute to human intellectual life, not only within but beyond the academy. Where US higher education (even supposedly public universities) is almost entirely privatised, in the German professoriate, we are virtually all servants of the state. The greatest challenge facing us in Germany is that we have handed over – indeed, we continue to hand over – control of work we did with public support to commercial, often for-profit, corporations. And whether we are in privatised US or truly public German universities, Open Access is not enough. We need truly Open Data: researchers need to be able to download, augment (and/or modify), and then redistribute the resulting new version as part of our scholarship. Here we face the challenge of ransoming commercialised sources and/or rebuilding our databases of sources with Open Data.

German Scholarship and Source Criticism in North America
When I entered the university in 1975, four of the sixteen or so professors in my department were German and my other professors had studied with professors who had themselves been trained in Germany. In the subsequent decades, I have lived through a historic shift away from the German philological tradition to an interest in literary theory and cultural studies with roots in France. When I became an assistant professor in 1985, I could seriously imagine building a career around editing texts, producing commentaries and other broadly philological activities. I did not pursue this pathway – and that is probably why I ended up with a permanent position. Other than a handful of epigraphers and papyrologists, I cannot think of any colleague in any of the leading PhD granting Greco-Roman Studies Departments in the US who is an editor or commentary writer who is younger than me. My professional association voted to abandon the term philology and shifted from the American Philological Association to the Society for Classical Studies, a change in name that reflected a much deeper intellectual realignment. Colleagues have told me that it would not even be possible to get tenure at a leading US university for philological work – but, of course, we would never know because the same colleagues would never ask their administrations for a tenure-track line dedicated to such traditional work. One very promising young papyrologist told me that, in the interests of survival, he strenuously avoided the label of papyrology and referred to himself as a social historian of Greek-speaking Egypt.

This does not mean that my colleagues in North America do not base their analysis of Greco-Roman culture on a critical analysis of their sources. Rather, the print infrastructure for Ancient Greek and Latin – the editions, the commentaries, the lexica, the specialized encyclopedias etc. – had reached such a point of maturity that people simply built upon it. The editions of Ancient Greek and Latin available in 2015 may be better than those available when I became an assistant professor in 1985, but any such improvements have had little perceived impact upon how we use those sources to understand the past. Epigraphers and papyrologists may have contributed entirely new sources and opened up new lines of research, but epigraphy and papyrology are treated as technical fields, significant primarily insofar as they support broader interpretive research.

Thus, if we wish to advance the international standing of German scholarship, it is not enough to advance the inherent excellence of that scholarship. We have to ask how much value scholars from beyond Germany attach to that scholarship. German scholarship may be the best in the world but it can only lead if others outside of Germany pay attention to that work. The world is far bigger than the United States but, if you wish to play the international prestige game, it is difficult (though not impossible) to do so credibly unless you command the attention of the hegemonic universities in the United States and the English-speaking world.

German vs. English in Greco-Roman Studies
If we are concerned with the international standing of scholarship in Germany, we need to think about the language of publication and of instruction. In one study, the percentage of citations in leading English journals in Greco-Roman studies to German scholarship declined from c. 32% in 1956/1957, to c. 22% in 1985, to c. 10%. If we consider only publications from the previous 30 years, the percentage of German drops from 17% in the 1986 American Journal of Philology to an average of 6% in three other journals published in 2014 and 2015.[2] And these figures are for Greco-Roman studies, the largest field where scholars are expected to cite, if not to read, scholarship in German. In departments of English and of History (the two biggest fields), the role of German is even more problematic.

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[2]For details of this data (and its limitations), see <https://docs.google.com /document/d/1BMvclzEY2cYGuc_QUett3HqtGHw0lLqGZu2hk0MmKio /edit#heading=h.fpm48lmr1ow6>.

Education

The greatest challenge for German professors may be recognising that they have to hire assistants that can assume leadership in reinventing our fields. Our job may well be to help the next generation conceptualise new digital methods in terms of traditional scholarly values. Thus we often confuse a form (e.g., traditional academic brandname journals and publishers with conventional peer review) with our actual goal (e.g., producing scholarship that is rigorous and advances human understanding in some significant way). Much as I hate to see chairs vanish, there are advantages to being able to create a new chair (as I have experienced at Leipzig). Here Germany may have an advantage (1) because creating a chair often means creating several full-time positions and (2) because there is more research support for the Humanities in Germany than in the US. Both of these factors have the potential to enable rapid, substantive development.

Conclusion

If one third of the German chairs essential to source criticism disappeared between 1997 and 2011, we should not expect different results by reasserting the importance of those chairs – those arguments were, almost always, already made when the chairs were cut. The systematic elimination of those chairs reflects a strong judgment that other subjects are more important to modern scholarship. We need to rethink the contributions that those chairs can make and it is here that the shift to a digital age has its greatest potential. First, digital methods allow us not only to work with more materials than were the case in print but also to represent far more of our interpretations – including dense linguistic and translational such as linguists have used to work with languages that they have not been able to study. This, in turn, allows us to make primary sources accessible to a broader audience (including professional researchers working with sources in more languages than they can master – a phenomenon inherent in many transnational questions, if properly construed). Second, the more of our conclusions we can represent in a machine actionable (and thus logically abstracted) form, the more we can disseminate those ideas beyond our native language (e.g., we can potentially increase visibility and use of German-language scholarship). Third, the vast and explosively growing body of primary materials poses a challenge and an opportunity. The scale of those materials is too great for the use of traditional manual methods alone and automated methods are still imperfect. We need to cultivate a new, distributed, decentralized but still rationally hierarchical culture of scholarly production if we are to analyse billions of words (to speak only of textual sources). The most important project in Greco-Roman studies in the past fifteen years is the Homer Multitext Project, first because it has shown both that undergraduates can collaborate to produce rigorous and complex textual data and second because it has shown that such work engages students, drawing more students to the study of Classical Greek and raising the level of their contributions. It is in such a changed intellectual culture, rather than in more specialist-on-specialist publication, that we may be able to transform the perceived value of source criticism within intellectual life and reverse the precipitous decline in institutional support.

An overview of all contributions to this discussion can be found here: <http://www.hsozkult.de/text/id/texte-2890>.