

Against Forensics/ Statement on History.

There is something funny about how in academic research texts are called “sources.” To me it seems as if this very term stems from the fact that, as one engages in research, each particular text that is sought feels like an origin point in its own right, toward which the researcher navigates through its web of references. By the time you’ve found the book in the library, there is this distinct feeling that accompanies its discovery—it is as if you were lost, but with the text in hand, you are now both found. The sensation, however, is brief. Because, inevitably, no text can truly behave as a source. For one thing, by the time you have your hands on the sought-for text, the process of searching has colored it. There are reasons you’ve searched for it, and those reasons have already relativized its very status as an origin. Previous texts have contextualized the source amongst themselves, have given you (as researcher) expectations, hope even. Before opening the text, before reading, it is already disproven as the source, it is already dispersed from the captivity of its binding. All this is to say that a text can only be a source in a fleeting, and thus impermanent way. To call a text a source is self-referential: here is the source of the clues scattered across so many pages that led me on this hunt. To be self-referential is to contextualize a concept in one’s own actions. One hunts because one is not omniscient—specifically, because one’s senses are temporal, stuck progressing in time, it seems, ever forward.

It is the temporal limits of sensorial experience that I believe the field of history seeks to give solace—though the access provided by works of history isn’t perfect, and though history therefore requires us to work our imaginations, through history we nonetheless make a doomed attempt to extend our senses toward perceiving the past. While the researcher traces the way back from secondary to primary sources, from historiographical works, to historical works, to writings from ‘the period,’ the act of reading regardless brings all those texts into the researcher’s experiential present. In the act of reading, the written word becomes its own form of experience, its own basis for

empirical deduction. Historians can only distance themselves from this fact by writing their own understandings down in new bodies of research, thus creating a record of their thoughts that acts as a stabilized and past-tense proxy for what were once active, experienced lines of thinking. Freed from its tether to the body of its maker, a history book then makes itself available to become a source. The history shifts into a different temporality, the process continues.

In the field of history, this process of discovery—while sensual—symptomatically produces the central critique of sensory perception amongst historians. In a word, the problem that keeps historians up at night is that of hindsight. The present is full of seemingly useful tools for perceiving the past—modes of thinking, artifacts, archives, libraries of books, artworks, architecture—but every tool seems to shroud the past even as it exposes it. The contemporary historian steels herself against the deceiving superpowers of her hindsight. These days, the good researcher seeks instead toward seeing the past from how it may have been experienced, understood, or orchestrated from within its time, and she therefore seeks yet another superpower: that of having a perspective that is not her own. The fight against anachronism in history thus brings the field into conceptual harmony with contemporary anthropology, where a similar concern with shirking the constraints of one's own cultural/political/ideological perspectives have become paramount to the task of understanding the ideologies and systems of those who are nonetheless framed by the researcher's inquiry.

The bad news brought to us by such concerns is thus that our very senses are tainted. We cannot see or hear but from some particular vantage point. Add to that the problem of time, which unrelentingly churns past, rendering any present seeing so quickly—with the blink of an eye—into insight, into memory, into hindsight. Facing such a disintegration of the empirical even dislodges the very notion of the self, which it-self becomes anachronistic—for what is a sense of self but a conception that is constructed by the powers of hindsight to deduce a presently working conception of 'what I am' from past experience?

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