

# For an epistemology of sources: Who's talking there?<sup>1</sup>

## Para uma epistemologia das fontes: Quem fala através delas?

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### ABSTRACT

Usually, historians in France recognize that their task is to “make the sources speak”. What might appear to be a simple question of a technical nature (making known what is contained in the sources), however, conceals a balance of power that is certainly inherent to the historical academic field. Indeed, “making the sources speak” poses a problem in terms of both the concept of “sources” and the verb “to speak”. Initially, the crucial issue for a discipline that sees itself as a mode of indirect knowledge was to make the medium transparent, as if we could hear the witnesses directly in order to arrive at the truth of things. Hence the designation of historical material with a set of naturalizing metaphors that have had the crucial consequence of eliminating from historical reflection the meaning effects linked to the

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conditions of transmission and, in particular, archiving (selection, classification, inventory), which have only appeared on the historians' horizon since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as part of the "documentary turn". This has not, however, done away with the question of the voices to be heard in the sources, which has been taken over by ethical concerns, giving to the "archival turn" a distinctly different tone from the "documentary turn". This raises the question of the extent to which this question of the voices to be recovered not only reintroduces the dream of unmediated access to the past, but also overvalues the individual at the expense of society, as part of a regression in collective rationality.

**KEYWORD:** Sources; Archives; Voices; Categorization; Dehistoricization.

### **RESUMO**

Habitualmente, os historiadores em França reconhecem que a sua tarefa é "fazer falar as fontes". O que poderia parecer uma mera questão de natureza técnica (dar a conhecer aquilo que as fontes contêm) esconde, no entanto, um equilíbrio de poder que é certamente intrínseco ao campo académico da História. De facto, "fazer falar as fontes" coloca um problema tanto no conceito de "fontes" como no verbo "falar". Inicialmente, a questão central para uma disciplina que se assume como um modo de conhecimento indireto era tornar o meio transparente, como se pudéssemos ouvir diretamente os testemunhos e, assim, chegar à verdade das coisas. Daí a utilização de um conjunto de metáforas naturalizantes para designar o material histórico, que excluiu da reflexão histórica a consideração dos efeitos ligados às condições de transmissão e, em particular, do arquivamento (seleção, classificação, inventário), elementos que só começaram a surgir no horizonte dos historiadores a partir do início do século XXI, no contexto da "viragem documental". Contudo, a questão das vozes presentes nas fontes permaneceu, passando a ser abordada a partir de preocupações éticas, que conferem à "viragem arquivística" um tom claramente distinto do da "viragem documental". Coloca-se assim a questão de saber até que ponto esta busca pelas vozes a serem recuperadas não só reintroduz o sonho do acesso não mediado ao passado, mas também sobrevaloriza o indivíduo em detrimento da sociedade, fazendo parte de uma regressão na racionalidade coletiva.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Fontes; Arquivos; Vozes; Categorização; Desistoricização.

They had not got quite free of their own past – but when they really did come across something ancient, they didn't know how to treat it. They were like little children admiring a spring, leaning in too far and falling headfirst into the water.

(Andrus Kivirähk, *The man who spoke snakish*, 2007)

I would like to start with a reminder: epistemology is “the critical study of the postulates, conclusions and methods of a particular science, considered from the point of view of its evolution, in order to determine its logical origin, value and scientific scope” (CNRTL, 2012) and, in this way, to enable the progress of knowledge; furthermore it seems to me that we can consider with Alain Guereau that “the evolution of historical science has reached a point where the elucidation of presuppositions constitutes an essential key to all progress” (Guereau, 2001, p. 1140). It is therefore a certain number of presuppositions surrounding sources that will constitute my object here.

To do so, I shall use an expression familiar to French historians, namely the task of *faire parler les sources* (“making the sources speak”). What might appear to be a simple technical question (making known what is contained in the sources) may well conceal a hidden balance of power, if we accept that in French, *faire parler (quelqu'un)* (“making [somebody] speak”) refers rather to the fact of extracting from him, generally against his will or even under torture, words hitherto unspoken. The question therefore arises: to what extent does the historian's classic relationship with sources consist in torturing them? To make them say what we think they are hiding? But as all the work on torture has shown, if in a few cases sincere (which does not mean exact) things are extracted, more often than not the torturer is told what he wants to hear... Does making sources speak, then, amount to making them say what is expected of them, rather than really paying attention to what *they* have to say? If so, what do they have to tell us as sources, beyond their most visible statement (the text)?

I will begin by trying to pin down what the phrase “as a source” means in the sentence that I have just written, before asking what to “speak” or “tell” mean with respect to a source.

## I. “Sources” as a dehistoricization of archives

Here, I am going to address the question of the production of *silences* – paradoxically correlative to the interrogation of what *speaks* in sources – in

this case questioning everything that precedes historical seizure, leading to the spontaneous belief that the presence of sources is self-evident, with only destruction being historical acts.

## 1. Fons sive Natura?

This interrogative formula<sup>2</sup> is expressly a hijacking (by me) of a formula used by Spinoza in his *Theologico-Political Treatise* (1670) and then in the fourth part of the *Ethics* (written between 1661 and 1675 and published at his death in 1677) intitulated “De servitute humana seu de affectum viribus”, the two terms *Deus* and *Natura* being equivalent here (Spinoza, 1905, pp. 113; 116)<sup>3</sup> – but as Descartes also already stated in his sixth *Méditation Métaphysique* (1641): “By Nature, considered in general, I now mean nothing other than God himself, or the order and disposition that God has established in created things” (Descartes, 1973, p. 88)<sup>4</sup>.

I am introducing here, in my question, the hypothesis of an equivalence between *Fons* and *Natura* – but, logically, this hypothesis necessarily rests, since it is based on the Spinozian formula, on an analogy between the terms *Deus* and *Fons*. This analogy, however, is by no means gratuitous on my part: it is based on the ancient metaphor of the thirst for salvation that only God can quench, and is expressed in the close relationship, in theology as in liturgy, between water and the operation of the Holy Spirit. A number of textual and pictorial clues point to this.

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<sup>2</sup> Part of what follows in this section was presented in a lecture entitled “*Fons sive Natura? L'immanence des sources face à la transcendance naturaliste de l'historien*”, delivered at the opening of a conference (*Source, poison ou accident: comprendre le document dans les sciences historiques*) organized by the École nationale des chartes in Paris on October 19, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Spinoza, 1905, p. 113 (“æternum namque illud et infinitum Ens, quod Deum seu Naturam appellamus, eadem, qua existit, necessitate agit. [...] Ratio igitur, seu causa, cur Deus seu Natura agit, et cur existit, una eademque est”) and p. 116 (“Potentia, qua res singulares, et consequenter homo suum esse conservat, est ipsa Dei sive Naturæ potentia [...]. Potentia itaque hominis, quatenus per ipsius actualem essentiam explicatur, pars est infinitæ Dei seu Naturæ potentiæ, hoc est essentiæ”), translated in English by R. H. M. Elwes: “the eternal and infinite Being, which we call God or Nature, acts by the same necessity as that whereby it exists. [...] The reason or cause why God or Nature exists, and the reason why he acts, are one and the same”; then “The power, whereby each particular thing, and consequently man, preserves his being, is the power of God or of Nature [...]. Thus the power of man, in so far as it is explained through his own actual essence, is a part of the infinite power of God or Nature, in other words, of the essence thereof”.

<sup>4</sup> Descartes, 1973, p. 88: “Par la nature, considérée en général, je n'entends maintenant autre chose que Dieu même, ou bien l'ordre et la disposition que Dieu a établie dans les choses créées”.

For example, the lexicogram produced by Nicolas Perreaux to show the lexical field of “water” in *Patrologia Latina* (essentially for the fourth through twelfth centuries) (Perreaux, 2013, p. 370) clearly shows that *Fons* focuses on all the instruments or signs of redemption (*Christus, ecclesia, fides, bonum, baptisma, sacrum-sacer, oleum, lacrima, sanguis, gaudium, puteus*, etc.). For a slightly later period, consider the mid-fifteenth-century painting by the Pseudo-Van Eyck in the Prado entitled *La fuente de la Gracia* (Workshop of Jan van Eyck, 1440-1450), featuring the Father in pontifical majesty, the Son as lamb and the Holy Spirit as wellspring. Finally, still at the end of the Ancien Régime (in Jacques Le Goff’s perspective of the “long Middle Ages”), a number of paintings depict *Saint John the Baptist at the spring* (e.g. those painted by Nicolas Régnier, ca. 1625; Guercino, 1661; or Giacomo Parolini, 1710), where the source is obviously the Grace lavished by God, but which human beings must seek out and strive to capture (in a certain way, and irrespective of the difference in dates, these latter paintings represent the human extension of the Prado painting).

The certainly apocryphal nature of the formula *Fons sive Natura* that I am setting out here is therefore not based on the analogy between *Fons* and *Deus*, which was classic in medieval society (in the broadest sense), but on the novelty that the analogy between *Deus* and *Natura* represented in the mid-seventeenth century. I refer here to Descartes and Spinoza because of what they (unintentionally) represent from the point of view of modernity – and which in both cases earned them violent attacks and accusations of pantheism or even atheism. From a theological point of view, the scandal of Spinoza’s *Deus sive Natura* was to propose an immanentist vision of God, a God neither personified nor transcendent, namely the natural world. To clarify matters, let me remind you that immanence designates the character of that which has its principle in itself, and which must therefore be explained by itself, without reference to an external truth – in contrast to transcendence, which corresponds to what Marcel Gauchet (1977, p. 5) termed the *dette du sens* (“debt of meaning”)<sup>5</sup>: the cause, principle or meaning of things or beings being found outside themselves, in an external and superior cause, namely in God in the case of medieval societies.

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<sup>5</sup> “*Dette du sens*: ce que durant des millénaires les hommes ont reconnu devoir aux dieux, ce que les sociétés ont à peu près toujours cru devoir aux opérations des autres, aux décrets de l’au-delà ou aux volontés de l’invisible.” (“*Debt of meaning*: what for millennia men have acknowledged they owe to the gods, what societies have more or less always believed they owed to the operations of others, to the decrees of the beyond or to the wills of the invisible.”) (Gauchet, 1977, p. 5)

Now, the modern world is specifically characterized by what Max Weber in 1917 called the *Entzauberung der Welt* ("disenchantment of the world", taken up again in 1985 by Marcel Gauchet, in a work whose subtitle is very close to that of his 1977 article) (Weber, 1919, p. 16; Gauchet, 1985) – a disenchantment of the world whose most radical formulation is undoubtedly Nietzsche's "God is dead" (*The Gay Science*, 1882) and by virtue of which we can no longer hope to discover a transcendent, hidden truth (or, for that matter, a sense of history, devoid of any finality, be it that of salvation or the universal happiness of mankind)<sup>6</sup>. As a result, Spinoza, like Descartes, would be – unwittingly and unwillingly – a harbinger of modernity, *i.e.* of the immanence of the meaning of the world and, as far as the historian is concerned, of the immanence of the meaning of sources on the world's past.

To speak, as I do here, of the "immanence of sources" is then to assume that the meaning of what we call "sources" must first and foremost be referred to their very existence (answering the question "how is it that sources exist?" or, more simply, "why do we have sources – or at least things we call 'sources'?"), rather than taking this existence for granted and focusing solely on the *causa scribendi* and author's intentionality (forming a kind of "beyond" of the text). This was one of the intuitions behind the so-called *linguistic turn*, which – for reasons of competitive positioning within the United States' academic field (Noiriel, 2005, pp. 160-176) – radicalized the demand to take into account the discursive logics internal to texts, to the point of denying them any historicity (leading one of its main theoretical inspirers, Jacques Derrida, to reaffirm that "there is no such thing as *hors-contexte*" (Derrida, 1990, p. 252).

What we call "sources" are not simply containers of information that we have to capture; they are part of the social reality which we set out to study. They are not, therefore, screens for reality – in the double sense of a surface for projecting or hiding what lies behind – they are the *only* reality with which historians are confronted (hence the idea of the immanence of sources), and from which we can attempt to identify the social interrelations that generated them, and which they helped to configure. Over and above what they say, it is therefore their produced and preserved character, as the only effective foundations of their existence today, that should first and foremost retain our attention.

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<sup>6</sup> Daston, 1995, p. 40, proposes a more refined interpretation of the phenomenon, to which I will return below.

## 2. Sources? What sources?

However, I have already stressed the distinction between “sources” and “what we call ‘sources’”. Indeed, “sources” are not just preserved documents (written or otherwise); they are first and foremost a concept, *i.e.* a way of ordering the world and, more prosaically, of defining a field of observation. I shall not go back over what I have already had occasion to write about the role of concepts in the work of historians, and more broadly, within the Dulac Group, in the science of the social (Morsel, 2012; Dulac, 2022, p. 25).

However, there are two things to remember about the concept of “sources”. In 2003/2004, I outlined the semantic transformations of the French term (Morsel, 2004). Since then, I have continued this examination (Morsel, 2009, pp. 42-45) and extended it to the German case (given Germany’s key role in the construction of historical science in the nineteenth century, but also thanks to the work of Hans Blumenberg (2009), Ludolf Kuchenbuch (2000), Thomas Rathmann and Nikolaus Wegmann (2004)).

Three main observations can be made: on the one hand, as shown by the frequency graphs based on the thousands of works digitized by Google<sup>7</sup>, there is a clear synchrony between French and German (but the same applies to English) in the start of the specifically historical use of the concept, with a few isolated uses in the eighteenth century (none before) and regular and increasing use from around 1800, *i.e.* when the practice of history and its theory began to take shape. The results of our syntagmatic searches on Google Books seem to me to be confirmed by our search for uses of the word *Geschichtsquelle* (“source of history”) in the *Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* from 1600 to 2000 (DWDS, n.d.).

The second observation concerns the substitution, towards the end of the nineteenth century, of a metaphor of horizontal flow for the earlier one of vertical drawing: *puiser aux sources, aus der Quelle schöpfen* (“to draw from the sources” – reminiscent of the very close semantic proximity, in the

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<sup>7</sup> Google Books Ngram Viewer. (n.d.). *Source historique, sources historiques*. Google. [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=source+historique,sources+historiques&year\\_start=1700&year\\_end=2019&corpus=fr-2019&smoothing=3](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=source+historique,sources+historiques&year_start=1700&year_end=2019&corpus=fr-2019&smoothing=3); Google Books Ngram Viewer. (n.d.). *Geschichtsquellen, Geschichtsquelle, historische Quelle, historischen Quellen*. Google. [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Geschichtsquellen,Geschichtsquelle,historische+Quelle,historisc hen+Quellen&year\\_start=1700&year\\_end=2019&corpus=de-2019&smoothing=3](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Geschichtsquellen,Geschichtsquelle,historische+Quelle,historisc hen+Quellen&year_start=1700&year_end=2019&corpus=de-2019&smoothing=3); Google Books Ngram Viewer. (n.d.). *Historical source, historical sources, sources of history, source of history*. Google. [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=historical+source,historical+sources,sources+of+hi story,source+of+history&year\\_start=1700&year\\_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=historical+source,historical+sources,sources+of+hi story,source+of+history&year_start=1700&year_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3)

Middle Ages, between *fons* and *puteus*)<sup>8</sup>. But what disappears is not so much the depth/surface relationship (which is still very much present in the psychoanalysis being developed at the time) as the evocation of the researcher's effort ("drawing") in favor of a spontaneous phenomenon, flowing from source – the meaning of the French expression *couler de source* (literally "to flow from source") also changing: from being easy (as opposed to drawing) still in the seventeenth century, it now means being obvious, self-evident.

The third observation concerns the spatial, rather than temporal, spread of the "gushing water" metaphor: it can be found in all European (Romance, Germanic, Scandinavian, Slavic, Greek, Hungarian) languages, or in languages that have been europeanized from the very point of view of historical practice (Hebrew, Japanese). What is important here is that exactly the same metaphor of gushing water has been adopted to designate the basic matter of the historical craft, whereas metaphors are almost never equivalent from one language to another. We should therefore consider that not only does historical science seem to have been built from 1800 onwards around the spontaneous use of a concept common to all European or European-inspired historiographies, but above all that this concept seemed to carry a connotation of spontaneous gushing – apparently more crucial than the idea of the historian's effort.

### 3. Truth and naturalism

I confess to having found no historical study of the metaphorical values of water at the end of the Ancien Régime, given that the corresponding article in the *Encyclopédie* is limited to the concrete, physical, chemical, medical and other aspects of water. I would remind you, however, that Jean Starobinski emphasized the importance of water as a principle of transparency, neutrality and naturalness in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Starobinski, 1971, pp. 303-309), and that when choosing the standards for the new, supposedly natural, metric system, the central referents were the terrestrial meridian (as a measure of length) and water (as a measure of mass), the combination of these two referents defining measures of capacity (1 l. = 1 dm<sup>3</sup>).

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<sup>8</sup> By way of example: "les chartes, les chroniques et d'autres sources où l'on a coutume de puiser pour écrire l'histoire" (Quiquerez, 1856, p. 39). Half a century later, Delisle (1907, p. 296) refers to royal deeds "provenant de sources diverses, mais toutes très pures, que le hasard a fait affluer, les uns au Musée britannique, les autres au Record Office".



Examining the connotations of the “wellspring” metaphor in fact leads in two directions: on the one hand, water as a figure of transparency, and on the other, gushing as a figure of naturalness. I shall not dwell here on the first point (transparency), which refers to an epistemology of historical truth on which I have had occasion to comment recently (Morsel & Noûs, 2022). As far as naturalness is concerned, we could be satisfied with a simple reading in terms of the history of ideas, with the choice of the word “sources” simply stemming from a taste for the wild and pure nature characteristic of the end of the Ancien Régime and the prodromes of Romanticism. But that would be to stop halfway, considering that the only thing that has changed is the appreciation of nature, in contrast to the previous situation – that is, in a way, to the transition from Voltaire to Rousseau<sup>9</sup>, the latter having been accused by the former of wishing to return us to the state of nature, *i.e.* inhumanity (Voltaire, 1880, p. 447)<sup>10</sup>.

But modernity does not lie in a different relationship with nature, it lies in the very relationship with nature, with nature itself. And therein lies the main novelty in relation to what I had conceived in 2003/2004. For while I had indeed emphasized the naturalizing effect (in the sense of making something natural, obvious, self-evident) of the metaphor of the source, I had not imagined the extent to which this relationship to nature referred to something much deeper than the simple representations or discourses that might be confronted, as between Voltaire and Rousseau.

Indeed, in 2005, Philippe Descola’s book *Par-delà nature et culture* was published, which shows how human societies are structurally based on four fundamental ontologies, *i.e.* four ways of thinking about the world and their relationship to other beings: totemistic, animistic, analogistic and naturalistic ontologies. While P. Descola does not speak of the Middle Ages, but only of early modernity (up to and including the seventeenth century) in order to link it to analogist ontology, Anita Guerreau-Jalabert’s works of the 2010s have clearly shown that the same applies to the Middle Ages (Guerreau-Jalabert, 2015), and thus to what we might call the “long Middle Ages”, up to and including the seventeenth century.

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<sup>9</sup> Goethe is said to have declared that “Voltaire is the end of the old world, Rousseau the beginning of the new” – but I have not been able to find the origin of this often-quoted apophthegm (e.g. by Babbitt, 1919, p. 32; Guitton, 1980, p. 950) but without any precise reference...

<sup>10</sup> “On n’a jamais employé tant d’esprit à vouloir nous rendre bêtes; il prend envie de marcher à quatre pattes [qualified further as “allure naturelle”] quand on lit votre ouvrage [*i.e.*, Rousseau’s *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes*, 1754]” (Voltaire, 1880, p. 447).

But this analogism has given way to naturalism, *i.e.* (contrary to what Marcel Gauchet envisaged) to a new transcendence – that of nature, as a principle both good and original (some even see in the discourse on nature a new metaphysics). This naturalism consists in the certainty “that nature exists and that a certain number of entities [*i.e.* everything that does not belong to culture] owe their existence and development to a principle alien to the effects of the human will” (Descola, 1996, p. 65)<sup>11</sup> – which is why it is appropriate to speak of naturalistic transcendence. Already in 1995, Loraine Daston had underlined that after 1700, “nature became the other” in relation to the human being, so that biological metaphors could be transferred on society, but also anthropomorphist arguments on nature – which conversely made easier the biological interpretation of society. And she argues that the scientific revolution in the nineteenth century produced less a secularization or Weber’s disenchantment of the world than the “vigorous imposition of Judeo-Christian theology” (Daston, 1995, p. 40).

Naturalistic ontology thus tends to deny human action as the cause of the appearance and development of things considered “natural”, by inventing a nature where there is none – which nowadays increasingly takes the form of a biologization of the social, *i.e.* a wild transfer of biological notions (DNA, organism, evolution, mutation, alpha male, etc.) onto social phenomena which, according to a “Durkheimian” epistemology, should be explained by the social. Hence, the more we talk about nature, the less we talk about society – and this biologization of the social was denounced by Bourdieu (1982, p. 50) and precisely studied in the collective book *Biology as Society* (Daston, 1995).

It is easy to see, then, that the process of “naturalization” brought about by the use of the word “sources” is part of a logic of de-socialization, *i.e.* ultimately of de-historicization. As a result, historians’ relationship with “sources” is twofold – on the one hand, because it is a way of designating the documents they work with, but on the other, because the concept functions as a symptom of what they should be contributing to: the constant rehistoricization of the social, against the tendency of any social system to generate amnesia about its origins. Consequently, beyond the fact that historians must always cite their sources, they must above all historicize them, *i.e.* account for the genesis of their availability today.

“Sources” are therefore not just “remains”, comparable – to keep an aquatic analogy – to what is left on humans’ beach once the sea of history

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<sup>11</sup> “La nature existe et un certain nombre d’entités doivent leur existence et leur développement à un principe étranger aux effets de la volonté humaine.” (Descola, 1996, p. 65).

has receded... Indeed, these “remains” have been preserved, through the procedures of archiving, namely sorting and classifying. To speak of “my/our sources” without further ado is not only to naturalize their existence, and thus to sacrifice to the naturalist ontology that governs our conception of the world, it is to obliterate all the technologies, inseparably historical and sociological, that have made and still make documents accessible today. It is this invisibilization of prior operations that enables the researcher not only to speak spontaneously of “his/her sources”, but also and above all to become the exclusive author of his or her work, appropriations sanctioned by his or her name on the title page. Hence the question mark in the titles of sections 1 and 2.

#### 4) Generalized conceptual dehistoricization

In my opinion, it is this invisibilization that also leads to the ambiguity of the word “corpus” noted a short while ago by Eliana Magnani (2017) – among medievalists, but in my opinion not only. In fact, the term designates: 1) either all the documents of a certain type and/or from a certain area that remain with us today, such as the *Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale*, the *Corpus des sceaux français du Moyen Âge*, the *Corpus des actes royaux*, in Portugal the *Corpus dos mosaicos romanos de Portugal*, the *Corpus signorum das fíbulas proto-históricas e romanas de Portugal*, in Latin the *Corpus vitrearum*, the *Corpus christianorum*, the *Corpus Burgundiae Medii Aevi*, the *Corpus catalogorum Belgii*, the *Corpus epigraphicum portugalensium*, and so on; 2) or the set of documents assembled by a given individual for his or her own work (his or her working corpus).

It is as if the same word could designate both an inherited (“natural”) whole, coming to us like water from a spring, and the result of a set of procedures for collecting and sorting documents according to a problematic, as if the aforementioned inherited whole (such as the *Corpus epigraphicum portugalensium*) were not itself anything other than a self-existing whole (everything that has not disappeared), whereas it is the result of typification procedures (“epigraphy”, “seal”, “diploma”, “stained glass”, “book list”, “charter”, etc.) within a set of things made available today by generations of curators (in the broadest sense of the term)...

And it is without any doubt the same thing that is produced by another term, “data”, which I believe is being used more and more frequently, as a result of the transformations of the technical system that we are witnessing: computerization (cf. the German *EDV*, *Elektronische Datenverarbeitung*,

literally “electronic data processing”, for “informatics”) and the multiplication of databases that Jean-Philippe Genet designated in 1977 as “metasources” (Genet, 1977, p. 232). I had already noticed, in a purely impressionistic way, the substitutability of the formula “we have no data” for “we have no sources” on this or that phenomenon. But a more systematic examination of the notion leads to two observations.

On the one hand, the term “data” is in itself misleading, because it gives the impression that, as in the case of “sources”, what the historian is working on comes to him or her, somewhat mysteriously or naturally, by the grace of history, and therefore that he or she is working on what is already there – whereas in reality the only data are those that the historian gives himself or herself, by constituting his or her corpus of work. In fact, this question was already raised in the 1950s by sociologists in the English-speaking world (Jensen, 1950; Becker, 1952), followed by the entire constructivist current in sociology (for example Drucker, 2011), who drew attention to the fact that, to quote Jensen, “It is an unfortunate accident of history that the term *datum* (Latin, past participle of *dare*, ‘to give’) rather than *captum* (Latin, past participle of *capere*, ‘to take’) should have come to symbolize the unit-phenomenon in science. For science deals, not with ‘that which has been given’ by nature to the scientist, but with ‘that which has been taken’ or selected from nature by the scientist in accordance with his purpose, and to a degree even constructed out of nature by the scientist’s preliminary assumptions as to which of ‘the things which have been given’ are also to be ‘taken’ or observed.” (Jensen, 1950, p. ix; also quoted by Becker, 1952, p. 278).

They therefore advocate the use of *capta* rather than *data*, since it is the scientists who produce their material. However, in my view, this is only one aspect of the situation in which historians find themselves, since while they do take hold of their sources (when they build up their corpus in the second sense of the term), they are also dependent on all the previous procedures for making all ancient documents available, in the archival context.

The inadequacy of the concept of “data” for this second aspect, too, was highlighted by Bruno Latour, who then proposed instead the term *sub-lata* in the sense of “obtained” (less active than “taken”) to evoke the position of beneficiary that is that of the researcher:

the very word *data* [...] describes as poorly as possible what the ordinary cognitive capacities of scholars, scientists and intellectuals apply to. It should be replaced by the much more realistic term *obtained*, and consequently we should speak of *obtained bases*, of *sublata* rather

than *data*, in both Latin and English. [...] No hellenist, no sanskritist, no specialist in Mesopotamian tablets will be ashamed to say that, deprived of scholarly editions, he could not interpret anything and would have no higher or more meticulous thoughts than those that cross his mind as he pushes his shopping cart down the aisles of a supermarket. (Latour, 2007, p. 609)<sup>12</sup>

However, perhaps the most surprising thing for me – given that I was implicitly correlating the current use of the concept of “data” with the context of computerization – was to examine the evolution of the frequency of this use in the field of history. The curve of this evolution seems to be rigorously close to that of “sources”, at least if we compare the use of the syntagms “historical data” and “historical sources”, with even a prevalence of “data”<sup>13</sup> – without being able to distinguish for the moment, because the fine work has not yet been done, what comes under the properly historian discourse and what comes under the public discourse on the past. Nevertheless, it is also worth noting the remarkable synchronicity of the start, as if “data”, like “sources”, had been part of the mental horizon from the very beginnings of historical science.

So, it is not just the word “sources” that is causing the amnesia of documentary genesis, or at least the reduction of this genesis to the writing phase alone, it is the whole conceptual system developed between the mid-seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries, linked to the end of the feudal era (“long Middle Ages”) and the transition to the liberal/capitalist – or even naturalist – era, and which is clearly not specific to documentary designation alone. The same can be said for “corpus”, “data” – but also “texts” or “traces”, which transform documents into mere sets of signs of a bygone past<sup>14</sup>, at the expense of everything that ensured their “transformission”

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<sup>12</sup> “Ce mot même de *données* [...] décrit aussi mal que possible ce sur quoi s’appliquent les capacités cognitives ordinaires des érudits, des savants et des intellectuels. Il faudrait remplacer ce terme par celui, beaucoup plus réaliste, d’*obtenues* et parler par conséquent de *bases d’obtenues*, de *sublata* plutôt que de *data* pour parler à la fois latin et anglais. [...] Aucun helléniste, aucun sanskritiste, aucun spécialiste des tablettes mésopotamiennes n’aura honte de dire que, privé d’éditions savantes, il ne pourrait interpréter quoi que ce soit et n’aurait pas de pensées plus hautes ou plus méticuleuses que celles qui lui traversent l’esprit en poussant son caddie dans les allées d’un supermarché.” (Latour, 2007, p. 609)

<sup>13</sup> Google Books Ngram Viewer. (n.d.). *Données historiques, sources historiques*. Google. [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=données+historiques,sources+historiques&year\\_start=1600&year\\_end=2019&corpus=fr-2019&smoothing=3](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=données+historiques,sources+historiques&year_start=1600&year_end=2019&corpus=fr-2019&smoothing=3)

<sup>14</sup> About “texts”, see Cerquiglini (1989) as much as Kuchenbuch, Kleine (2006). About “traces” and their relation to the past, see Morsel (2016).

(Chouquer, 2007, pp. 255-256), namely transmission and transformation (concrete – by copying; by modification of intertextuality – in archiving; by requalification – conceptual; by change of perception – with the advent of observation in the scientific sense of the term).

Consequently: *Fons non Natura sed Historia*. And Ernst Pitz was quite right to consider that the first characteristic of a source now available is not so much to have been produced (a necessary but not sufficient condition) as to have been archived (Demade, 2004, p. 131). As a result, answering the question “Who is talking in the sources?” should lead to a broader solution: not only the author, not only the society in which he lived and which determined the general conditions of dicibility, but also the generations of archivists (in the broadest sense) who have ensured access to these sources today, at the cost of selections, classifications and inventorizations that cannot fail to weigh on the meaning we think we grasp in these “sources”. To borrow a famous metaphor, today’s historian is no more than a dwarf standing on the shoulders of archivists...

## II. Historicization of archives = recovered voices?

If the historicization of archives leads to the elimination of silences, does this mean that the voices of the past can be heard again? And if so, which ones? Those of archivists? Of transmitters? Others (including the “voiceless”)? This raises a deeper question: is anyone really speaking in the sources? What does “speaking” mean here, if not a metaphor?

In 2019, Maria de Lurdes Rosa, Rita Sampaio da Nóvoa, Alice Borges Gago and Maria João da Câmara secured publication of a book entitled *Recovered voices, newfound questions. Family archives and historical research* (Rosa et al., 2019). Unless I am mistaken, the question of recovered (or to-be-recovered) voices is addressed (apart from the Foreword by Ana Canas Delgado Martins, pp. 10-11) only in the introduction signed by the four coordinators (Rosa et al., 2019, pp. 13-20), but not in any of the contributions that make up the book. However, there is a very interesting shift here in relation to a reflection presented in 2012 in Maria de Lurdes Rosa’s introductory contribution to the volume she edited entitled *Arquivos de família, séc. XIII-XX: que presente, que futuro?*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Não foi por acaso que desde o início da formação dos estudos pós-coloniais assumiu papel central a crítica ao arquivo colonial, visto como poderosíssimo motor de reunião de

The general idea was that family archives provide access to a level of reality absent from public (state, official) archives, because the latter are largely the product of systems of social domination, for which archives had above all the function of governing humans. The voices of these humans are never heard, since they are transformed into objects of domination, and thus deprived of their condition as subjects. But although feminist studies drew early attention to the absence of women in historical narratives, and this absence was correlated with their widespread absence from sources, it was less from gender history that consideration of the effects of archiving came than from so-called “post-colonial” history.

In the 2019 book, however, it is less the question of the disappearance of the voices of little people in relation to the great that is raised than that of the role of historians and archivists in this disappearance: the “silences” – what historians generally call “lack of sources” – are in fact not only due to ancient (for me, medieval and post-medieval) producers and archivists, they are also produced by today’s historians and archivists, because of their choices, with no doubt less because of their own will than because they embody social institutions that function as sounding boards for social issues that go far beyond them (Rosa et al., 2019, pp. 13-14)<sup>16</sup>.

There has thus been a certain change in the way of conceiving the question of voices and silences, which, especially since the 1990s, has taken on a growing importance in the preoccupations of some historians as part of the *ethical turn* that has gripped history and underlies the North American *archival turn* – a development which, as I have already had occasion to emphasize, differs greatly from the *tournant documentaire* (“documentary turn”) observed in Europe (Morsel, 2021, p. 20). I am not going to return to this point here, especially as I believe that the question of the relationship between science and ethics is extremely complex and cannot be settled in a few sentences. On the other hand, I would like to try to clarify the ques-

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informação para uso governativo e, mais gravosa e essencialmente, como fator de exclusão perene de actores da História, porque excluídos do arquivo. Em reflexo, a valorização dos suportes de memória não estatais, não oficiais, em conjunto com todas tentativas teóricas de encontrar a voz dos subalternos, dos marginalizados, dos passivos, trouxe para a ribalta os arquivos de comunidades e evidenciou o interesse destas em conservarem e valorizarem as suas memórias. (Rosa, 2012, p. 16)

<sup>16</sup> However, historians and archivists also play an active role in this dialectics, whether they recognize it or not. When historiography favours certain types of sources to the detriment of others, voices are heard and others are silenced. When archival acquisition policies favour the integration of certain types of documentary sets over others, there are voices heard and others silenced. (Rosa et al., 2019, pp. 13-14)

tion of the discourse conveyed on archives using the question of “voices”. This implies that I will not attempt to answer all the theoretical or epistemological questions raised by the use of this metaphor (since it is indeed a metaphor: in most historical cases, it is not a question of voices that are actually heard), but that I will instead focus on the relationship between this metaphorical use and the question that concerns us here, that of sources and archives. A first key aspect of this use of the metaphor of voices to be reheard consists in restoring to all actors their status as subjects. However, this requirement for restitution rests on two foundations, which are not necessarily present at the same time.

### **A moral duty for the historian?**

The first foundation is that of justice, by correcting the vision of the past or even avenging it – for example, when subaltern studies lead to cancel practices. In this perspective, history is no longer simply a place of know-how, but also and above all a place of duty. But what is a voice: a bodily/individual expression (thought to guarantee the authenticity of real history<sup>17</sup>, or a social relationship (disqualified as an abstraction constructed by historians) – because what speaks through your voice is not just you but, through you, something else? If we follow Pierre Bourdieu, the truth of what is said lies precisely outside vocal expression, because what is actually said is overdetermined by “the economy of linguistic exchanges” (subtitle of his 1982 book *Ce que parler veut dire*), while unconscious body language betrays “the truest” at the same time as it weighs on “all intentional expressions, starting with speech” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 51)<sup>18</sup>. This raises the question of whether the use of the metaphor of voices is indeed appropriate to signal the new attention which historians must pay to singular situations in relation to the dominant social norm.

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<sup>17</sup> But beside the voice’s bodily link with the singular individual, we may wonder whether the voice is not also a guarantee of authenticity, given the role it has long played in the construction of legal truth, due to the importance attached by Roman law to oral testimony, long superior to that recorded on “the skin of a dead animal” (Morsel, 2020, p. 161).

<sup>18</sup> “Le corps fonctionne donc comme un langage par lequel on est parlé plutôt qu’on ne le parle, un langage de la nature, où se trahit le plus caché et le plus vrai à la fois, parce que le moins consciemment contrôlé et contrôlable, et qui contamine et surdétermine de ses messages perçus et aperçus toutes les expressions intentionnelles, à commencer par la parole.” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 51)



What is more, David W. Sabeau has observed how, in Württemberg in the modern era, court and administrative reports set up formulas by which those writing put at a distance “popular” words considered “dirty” (not only coarse language, but even quite simply the fact of talking about limbs or bodily organs), within the framework of logics of distinction in which both the speaking/writing relationship and that between questioner and respondent are articulated (Sabeau, 1996). In so doing, respondents are returned to the sphere of the carnal, while those who write are attached to the sphere of the spiritual. In this light, we should ask ourselves to what extent seeking out the voices of the dominated is not a way of renewing their assignment to the carnal (which in our society has become the corporeal, as Pierre Bourdieu’s long-standing observations on the assignment of workers, women and peasants to the corporeal clearly show (Bourdieu, 1962, pp. 96-109; Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1980, pp. 173-195; Bourdieu, 1990) and reserving the spiritual (in our society: intelligence) for the dominant.

However, this is not the place to debate the merits or otherwise of this demand for justice, which also raises the problem of the relationship between history and the past, and above all that of the historian’s responsibility towards the people of the past, all the people of the past (including the modest and/or marginalized). Here we would return to the idea, notably developed by the philosopher Paul Ricœur, that an essential function of the historian is to save the people of the past from oblivion – which is but only possible if we mourn by accepting the loss forever of certain things from the past (Ricœur, 2000). However, the first mourning we have to do is that we do not work on things or people, but on documents that tell us about them – this is our historian condition, which in no way implies a position of inferiority for historians in relation to other scientists who would work directly on their object (I showed the inaccuracy of this belief in Morsel, 2016, pp. 864-867). Consequently, mourning the past is in a way consubstantial with historical work as work on documents, because the past is not the historian’s object, and this work is not intended for the resurrection of the past (which, according to Jules Michelet, 1880, pp. iii-iv, and 1987, p. 25, or more recently to Henri-Irénée Marrou, 1961, pp. 1468-1470, should be the goal of historians), by treating archives as “traces” of a vanished reality, when the first task is to try to find in them what is symptomatic of the historicity of their engendering (Morsel, 2016). This is to say that treating archives as voices is contradictory to the aforementioned task of rehistoricizing sources...

## 2. A historiographical renewal?

The second key aspect of the use of the metaphor of voices is the (re) appearance of actors in historical questioning, in contrast to French social history (the history of social structures and groups), whose paradigm had dominated the international historiographical landscape (under the misleading name of *École des Annales*) until the late 1970s, before entering a crisis of relative exhaustion of its explanatory potential in the face of the US *linguistic turn* and Italian *microstoria*, but also, in France itself, of the discursive history (of Althusserian or Foucauldian obedience). In addition to abstracting from the structures of domination revealed by the archives that implemented them and preserve their form, priority was now given to identifying individual consciousnesses, to which the concept of “voice” could provide a convenient cloak, with the underlying idea that a voice refers, through the intermediary of a particular body, to a concrete, real individual (as opposed to society, which would not really exist – as Margareth Thatcher had clearly asserted).

To this should be added a concern about the alleged novelty of the archival turn’s questioning of voice. As far back as 1969, in a work I consider fundamental for historians, *L’archéologie du savoir*, Michel Foucault was already perceiving an undermining of history as such, linked to “the questioning of the document”, against the traditional practice of

reconstructing, from what the documents say – and sometimes only half-worded – the past from which they emanate and which has now faded far behind them; the document was always treated as the language of a voice now silenced – its fragile trace, but by chance decipherable. [...] To put it briefly, history, in its traditional form, undertook to ‘memorize’ the *monuments* of the past, to transform them into *documents*, and to make these traces speak, traces which, by themselves, are often not verbal, or silently say something other than what they say. (Foucault, 1969, pp. 14-15)<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> [R]econstituer, à partir de ce que disent les documents – et parfois à demi-mot – le passé dont ils émanent et qui s’est évanoui maintenant loin derrière eux; le document était toujours traité comme le langage d’une voix maintenant réduite au silence – sa trace fragile, mais par chance déchiffrable. [...] Disons pour faire bref que l’histoire, dans sa forme traditionnelle, entreprenait de “mémoriser” les *monuments* du passé, de les transformer en *documents* et de faire parler ces traces qui, par elles-mêmes, souvent ne sont point verbales, ou disent en silence autre chose que ce qu’elles disent. (Foucault, 1969, pp. 14-15)

In Foucault's work, we can see that this undermining of traditional practice corresponds to the emergence of what came to be known as the *École des Annales*, whose crisis in the 1980s I mentioned earlier, led the *Annales* to make a "critical turn" in 1988 (and few time later to change its subtitle). As a result, is not the claim to be breaking silences and listening to the voices of actors from the 1990s onwards a false novelty – as the valorization of the singular and the individual (possibly under the banner of methodological individualism) at the expense of the collective and the social revives what Foucault calls "that form of [traditional] history that was in secret, but entirely, referred to the synthetic activity of the subject" and which "was to provide the sovereignty of consciousness with a safer, less exposed shelter than myths, kinship systems, languages, sexuality..."? (Foucault, 1969, p. 24)<sup>20</sup>.

However, if these remarks qualify the apparent novelty of listening to the voices of the voiceless, the same cannot be said for the question raised in the introduction to the aforementioned volume *Recovered voices*, namely the role of today's historians and archivists in the production of silences. For this then leads to making the current practice of historical research not the issue of a social ethic (*i.e.* respecting everyone) but the result of a scientific epistemology (*i.e.* taking into account the conditions of validity of results). Consequently, far more than a historiographical renewal, it is an epistemological renewal that we are dealing with, namely, integrating the role of archivists (and, when they do it, historians) in the meaning of documents.

### **3. Hearing rather than seeing – or more precisely, for the historian, rather than reading?**

The voices are heard, and it is clear that the use of this historical metaphor is based at least in part, implicitly, on a mistrust of the written word, reputed to relay the dominant ideology. The attention paid to this "media" shift (speaking vs. writing) would then simply be a recognition of the fact that the written word is a medium historically monopolized by the dominant (and thus confiscated from the working classes, women and various subaltern groups), including from the point of view of conditions of conservation and

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<sup>20</sup> [C]e qu'on pleure si fort, ce n'est pas la disparition de l'histoire, c'est l'effacement de cette forme d'histoire qui était en secret, mais tout entière référée à l'activité synthétique du sujet ; ce qu'on pleure, c'est ce devenir qui devait fournir à la souveraineté de la conscience un abri plus sûr, moins exposé, que les mythes, les systèmes de parenté, les langues, la sexualité ou le désir. (Foucault, 1969, p. 24)

accessibility to archives. As a result, there is something of a contradiction in putting archives and voices together – at least in the case of ancient archives, where there are no sound recordings, so that for those societies inaccessible to oral history, the historian is reduced to a quest for minute traces in the interstices or on the margins of the inscribed and archived dominant culture. This is what Arlette Farge did, for example, in her *Essai pour une histoire des voix au dix-huitième siècle* (Farge, 2009), based on written fragments from the French working classes, and what Antonio Castillo Gómez's research project (funded by Spanish research organizations) *Vox populi. Espacios, prácticas y estrategias de visibilidad de las escrituras del margen en las épocas moderna y contemporánea* (2020-2024) seeks to do, and which expressly falls within the framework of subaltern studies.

But why should a critique of the monopoly of the written word given over to reading necessarily imply the valorisation of the *spoken word* given over to *listening*? Because in any case, we will not be able to hear these voices: it is only a metaphor, as I said, and these so-called voices are indeed to be read – hence why this metaphor here? Finally, I would like to propose a global hypothesis – global because going beyond the intentionality of those who use this metaphor.

To do this, I will draw on Martin Jay's 1993 presentation of a general intellectual phenomenon, namely the development of what he calls "anti-ocularcentrism" in (more or less constructed) theories of knowledge in France (Jay, 1993) and, by extension, in the United States and other countries, thanks to the incredible (and strange) aura of the so-called "French thinkers"... This anti-ocularcentrism began as early as the second half of the nineteenth century but flourished especially in the two periods following the World Wars, with the shaking of the quiet assurance of Europeans and then North Americans, in the second half of the 20th century, as to the meaning of the world and history which they were leisurely sharing. And indeed, if we follow Martin Jay as I do here, anti-ocularcentrism means both the questioning of Enlightenment rationalism and doubt about the ability of vision to serve as the basis of knowledge – including vision as the practical foundation of reading, since both Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong saw the printing press as an instrument for reinforcing the visual (or scopic) regime of world knowledge.

We should therefore ask ourselves whether the widespread use, from the 1990s onwards, of the metaphor of voices to be found in archives is not just another sign of the crisis of consciousness of Westerners (in the broadest sense), but also of a crisis of their rationality. It is here, however, that the "tournant documentaire" can provide a response to this double crisis

(reflected in the *archival turn*), since it consists in revaluing the visuality as well as the materiality of documents, beyond their mere legibility and therefore their statements, which, indeed, most often emanate from the powerful (as far as the Middle Ages are concerned, including the long ones). This visuality and materiality refer to the conditions of production and use of these documents, in their time and afterwards, and their text is only one aspect of their meaning – even if it is apparently the easiest, and therefore the most misleading, to exploit.

Consequently, and beyond the social and identity-related issues involved, the question of voices seems to me to run the risk of distracting from the major problem facing historians: even before asking what the documents do not say, *i.e.* the silences of the sources, are we sure we understand what they mean – beyond the mere level of what they say? Do they not express much more than the voices we think we hear in them?

Ultimately, the answer to the question posed in my title (“Who’s talking there?”) would be: nobody, because we hear nothing in the sources.

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