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On sources and method

It does not follow that, because interpretation plays a necessary part in establishing the facts of history, and because no interpretation is wholly objective, one interpretation is as good as another, and the facts of history are in principle not amenable to objective interpretation.

E.H. Carr

The object of this chapter is to discuss some problems related to the research process, especially the choice of sources and use of method. Inevitably, some questions involving philosophy of science will be touched on, but I will try to keep this at a minimum. I will first briefly discuss the distinction between history and social sciences, and between qualitative and quantitative methods. Since my sources are mostly of a historical, qualitative kind, much of the chapter is devoted to a discussion of the collection and interpretation of sources.

Historians often distinguish between history as an *ideographical* discipline, as opposed to the *generalizing* social sciences. This refers to the notion that history is occupied with explaining singular cases or processes in the past, "das einmalige", while social sciences aim at establishing general theories or even "laws." This dichotomy is, however, a false one. First, the degree of theoretical orientation varies between the social sciences and between individual scholars within each of the social sciences, and the notion of "laws" is rather controversial e.g. in sociology and political science. Second, history is far from theory-free: there is much implicit theory in most historical accounts. As soon as history moves beyond mere description to narratives or explanations, general theories are invoked. The trend in history is for accounts to become more problem-oriented. Such accounts are often quite analytical, yet even source-oriented accounts contain some general theoretical assumptions.

Finally, history is not alone in concentrating on the singular, but, while the range of methods available to the historian is logically restricted by the fact that past events already happened, social scientists studying the present can also collect their own data. According to Robert K. Yin, case studies add two sources of evidence to the historian's repertoire: direct observation and systematic interviewing. When we are studying the past, case studies have much in common with the problem-oriented historical account. The most striking difference left is perhaps the literary style: the narrative form of history.

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2 See e.g. Ottar Dahl: *Problemer i historiens teori* (1986), Chapter 1; John Tosh: *The pursuit of history* (1996), Chapters 7 and 8. The distinction between source-oriented and problem-oriented approaches is made by Tosh (page 54).
This thesis is written in a social science tradition, in the sense that the theoretical assumptions are made explicit. In addition to the analysis of a specific historical process, a secondary aim is to contribute to the body of general knowledge about national identity and national conflict. At the same time, however, many of the methods normally used by the social sciences to gather information (such as interview techniques, surveys, observation) are out of the question, simply because the historical period under scrutiny is long gone, as are most of the people that lived through it as adults. The available sources are thus of a historical nature, and this in turn affects the choice of methods in the processing of data.

The advantage of using material that already exists is that the data are "natural" in that they are not artifacts of the research process, although their selection and interpretation will to a certain extent be affected by the focus and research questions. A disadvantage is that some of the data that we would like to have simply do not exist.

**Qualitative and quantitative method**

Broadly speaking, quantitative method is oriented towards frequencies and correlation, while qualitative method is oriented towards meaning and interpretation. In the social sciences, the choice of method has at times been a matter of principle: It used to be considered more "scientific" to count than to analyze meaning, and qualitative methods were seen as less objective than quantitative ones. In practice, there will always be a qualitative element in research: before you can count something, you have to decide what to count and how to categorize what you are counting. On the other hand, also qualitative techniques involve implicit counting: when we record the tendency of a text, we do so by paying attention to meaningful elements that keep recurring.

The struggle between these two camps now seems to be more or less over, and it is becoming increasingly common to combine methods. Today, qualitative and quantitative methods are acknowledged as the extremes of a scale, rather than dichotomies. The choice of method then becomes a strategic matter rather than a matter of principle. Combination of methods is often called "triangulation", and is also used as a method of validation.4

Historians have traditionally been more oriented towards qualitative than quantitative techniques. This follows partly from the nature of the historical sources: the most important sources of historical knowledge are symbolic sources (mostly texts) produced in order to convey meaning. Systematic statistics are in fact a relatively modern phenomenon,5 and even for modern periods the statistics needed are not always available. The narrative form traditionally employed by historians also predisposes for qualitative approaches.

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5 The modern census was invented in Scandinavia in the mid-18th century. See Tosh (1996:188).
On the sources and their collection

Tosh makes a useful distinction between history as what actually happened in the past, and history as the representation of that past in the work of historians. Such historical knowledge is principally restricted in two ways. On the one hand, the character of the sources will be influenced by contemporary ideas as to what is important, and it is the views of the literate strata and upper classes that are recorded. On the other hand, there is a limited number of preserved sources, and what actually gets preserved, is accidental. A lot of material once produced has been lost for various reasons, and many things were simply never recorded.

The main problem of historical research is thus first, to find the available relevant material, the sources that can be used to answer our research questions. Sometimes such sources do not exist, and we have to rephrase our questions. More often the range of potential sources exhausts our human and material means. In this case it becomes difficult to meet the requirement of completeness: i.e. to use all available data that may help to answer the questions that have been raised. A selection of sources is nearly always necessary, and the requirement then becomes adequate representation of the types of sources and tendencies.

The lack of relevant data concerning the national relations between Czechs and Slovaks at mass level has already been mentioned. On the whole, however, the problem was the opposite, and a selection had to be made. One option was to narrow down the focus, either by concentrating on the struggle over national identity, or by confining the study to practical nationality policies and national demands. Either choice would have allowed me to go deeper into that particular problem. A third possibility was to sample the relevant sources rather than seeking full coverage, while keeping the broader focus. This is what I decided on in the end.

Material was collected during several concentrated stays in Prague in the period 1994–97, combined with brief visits to Bratislava. I had feared that much of the printed material from the period had been destroyed during communism, but this turned out to be unfounded. I collected a broad range of material, from memoirs via newspaper articles, political programs, various school textbooks, and secondary literature to statistics. I went systematically through the population censuses and the statistical reports at the Bureau of Statistics, and I studied interpellations and stenographic records in the Parliament Library. I also visited several antiquarian bookstores and other bookstores several times.

Written historical sources may be categorized in various ways. One common divide is between primary sources (original, contemporary sources) and secondary literature (accounts based on original sources or other secondary literature). The distinction may not be as clear-cut as it appears. First, terms like original and contemporary are open to interpretation: How near in time and place must a source be in order to be considered original? Historians in any case tend to prefer the sources that are closest in time and place to the events in question.

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7 See Ottar Dahl: *Grunntrekk i historieforskningens metode* (1991), Chapter 4.
Second, and more important in this case, is that a text may be defined as a primary or secondary source depending on the use. A textbook in history would be a secondary source if I were interested in the historical events, but a primary source if I wanted to study how Czech and Slovak history was presented to the school children in terms of what identity was conveyed. For my purposes, a majority of the sources used in Part Three are primary sources, while the historical background part (Part Two) is based almost entirely on secondary literature.

Another common divide is between published and unpublished sources (Tosh) or, in Dahl's terminology, public and confidential sources. Finally, sources can be categorized according to author, with a distinction often being drawn between sources produced by governments and sources produced by corporations, associations or private individuals. Dahl here distinguishes between personal and institutional sources, the latter category covering governmental as well as non-governmental institutional sources. Within institutional sources, documentary sources represent a special category; sources that originated under controlled circumstances.

Some of my sources are documentary, like the Constitution of 1920 and various laws. Nearly all my sources are published. Many are institutional, or in other words "official", meaning that they were meant for the public and that they originated within an institutional framework. Examples here are political programs, declarations, decisions, school textbooks and stenographic reports of the sessions of the Parliament. Some are personal, written by some person on behalf of himself and meant for the public – mainly memoirs, articles and the like. My material contains little of what Dahl refers to as confidential sources (diaries, personal letters, internal documents and secret reports). These are especially well suited to provide insight into personal motives, hidden plans, spontaneous attitudes, while public sources provide better information on common attitudes and perceptions – which is mostly what I am after. A final distinction (between narrative sources and remnants) will be treated shortly.

At the top of the source hierarchy we find "sources which arise directly from everyday business or social intercourse, leaving open the task of interpretation", according to Tosh. Contemporary sources trying to interpret events (newspapers, books, etc.) may on the other hand offer valuable insight into mentalities, attitudes and political and historical assumptions.

One possible problem related to completeness and adequate representation is national bias. It might be argued that since most of the material was collected in Prague, a Czech bias is a potential risk. While aware of this danger (which is why I went to Bratislava in order to supplement my data), I feel that it should not be overestimated. Prague was the capital of Czechoslovakia, so all official publications from the First Republic were collected in Prague and are still available there. The National Library, the Parliamentary Library and the Bureau of Statistics were state-wide, Czechoslovak institutions, not just Czech ones.

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10 Tosh (1996:34). In a sense any text contains interpretation – the author's interpretation of himself and his social world.
There is, however, a second, more serious, problem: although the National Library was supposed to receive a copy of everything that was published, it is not very likely that they did receive everything, or indeed that they still have it. Volumes simply disappeared during communism – not so much because they were intentionally destroyed, but because librarians and others removed volumes or cards from the catalogues when books became illegal. Several times I ordered books that proved to be missing. Moreover, the process of feeding catalogue information into computers has only begun, which means that searching through the library is a tedious job of leafing through individual catalogue cards by hand. I may have missed a few.

A third problem that affects the requirement of completeness as well as adequate representation is related to the decision to leave out the major Czech and Slovak newspapers. Originally I had thought to investigate how the national question was treated in the major Czech and Slovak newspapers during the period. I soon realized that this would require more time and funding than I had. An exception has been made in the case of Slovák, the newspaper of the major Slovak nationalist opposition party of the First Republic, Hlinka's Slovak People's Party. Judging from the treatment of the national question in this paper, including the references to other (Czech) newspapers, my guess would be that the tone was somewhat sharper in the press than in the Parliament. On the other hand, my impression is clearly that the main complaints and demands were voiced in the Parliament, and that the difference is mainly one of style and rhetoric. Besides, my main focus is on the dynamics between national demands and nationality policies at the elite level, and for this purpose, the stenographic reports of the meetings are obviously a better source. They are closer to the events in time and place; moreover, they are sources that originated – to repeat the words of Tosh – "directly from everyday business or social intercourse, leaving open the task of interpretation", which also places them higher in the source hierarchy than newspapers.

Furthermore, I decided to go beyond the political elite and the political organs in the analysis of official Czechoslovakism and the struggle over national identity, in order to get a better grip of the arguments used. In addition to the political elite, a university-educated elite (an intelligentsia) helped formulate the arguments in favor of a Czechoslovak, respectively Slovak nation. This is justifiable also for the reason that it is not always easy to distinguish between this intelligentsia and the political elite, since people tended to change hats, and the intelligentsia was heavily represented among the political elite throughout the entire period.

The potential problems related to the selection of parliamentary documentation are mostly a matter of adequate representation. The stenographic reports of the meetings to be found in the Parliamentary Library are complete, with one small exception: The Law of the protection of the republic of 1923 with amendments of 1933 and 1934 made the stenographic reports subject to censorship. Since brackets [ ] are added where text has been stricken, it is possible to see where something has been removed. Before 1933, this affected only the speeches of members of the Communist Party. After this, I have registered one or two occasions where it was also applied to speakers of the Slovak People's Party. This does not seem to have been very common, and I thus judge the effect to have been minor.
The sheer amount of documentation made it quite impossible to go through everything. The question then becomes to what extent the registers are accurate, and whether the criteria of categorization changed from one period to the next in a way that may have affected the sample. I have no reason to believe the latter to be the case. I feel reasonably safe that I have found most of the parliamentary interpellations involving national demands or complaints on behalf of the Slovaks (and Czechs: they were not many), as well as most of the replies. A possible exception is interpellations pertaining to economic demands. I have not checked all entries on "economy", and to the extent that the national dimension of economy was not reflected in the register, I may not have found them. On the other hand, since I have also read a number of parliamentary debates on the state budgets, it seems likely that any missing topics have been covered this way. I thus do not consider the risk of inadequate representation of economic demands to be great.

There were 17 governments during the period, with new state budgets every year. I have read all the 13 debates following the inauguration of a new government. The budget debates take up hundreds of pages, and it has not been possible to go through every word. I have therefore aimed for a representative sample, in terms of time periods as well as the political and national colors of the governments, mainly in order to get an impression of how the central Czech and Slovak politicians argued around autonomy, national identity, and economy.

Part of my analysis of official Czechoslovakism is based on school textbooks in history. Such books are institutional products and can be expected to reflect the officially sanctioned view rather than the personal views of the authors. This is supported by the fact that they had to be authorized by the Ministry of Education and Public Enlightenment. Unfortunately, I have not been able to find an overview of the books actually used during the period. In order to be on the safe side, I have tried to sample books written by Czech and Slovak authors at various points of time, books meant for the primary school as well as for the secondary school, and authorized as well as non-authorized books.

**Critical approach to sources**

A second main problem of historical research, besides finding relevant material, is mastery of the sources. This ideal is sought through a critical approach to the sources. Tosh distinguishes between external and internal source criticism. External criticism refers to the evaluation of a document in order to test its authenticity: Is the information concerning the author, the place and the time it was written correct? Internal criticism concerns the contents of the document; it involves both an interpretation of the source, linguistically and in terms of historical context, and also an evaluation in terms of how reliable or credible the source is.  

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11 There were not always debates following the inauguration of a new government, especially when the change of government only was a reshuffle of ministers. This applies to all three Hodža governments (two in 1935 and in 1937). Nor was there any debate following the inauguration of the second caretaker government of Jan Černý in 1926.

Dahl distinguishes between four steps in this process: source observation, determination of origin, interpretation of content and determination of usefulness (evaluation of credibility, truth content and relevance). The former two correspond to Tosh's external criticism, the latter two to his internal criticism. Source criticism may thus be seen as a way to determine whether we can rely on the available sources, and whether they can be used to answer our research questions. The distinction between narrative sources and remnants is important. All written sources can be used as remnants of the past, to say something about the author or the conditions under which they originated – which means utilizing the performative aspect. Written sources can be divided into normative sources (expressing feelings, attitudes, wishes and the will of the author) and cognitive sources (saying something about factual events). Cognitive sources oriented towards the past are the only sources that can be used as narratives, as accounts of factual events. This distinction is not always clear-cut: I have, for example, used stenographic reports from the Parliamentary proceedings to document what national demands were raised and how the government responded, which involved both uses.

Credibility is especially important in the case of narrative sources. Elements in the evaluation of credibility of written, narrative sources are proximity in time and space; the author's ability, willingness and motivation to give a correct representation of what happened; the degree of control by contemporary witnesses; and consistency with other independent sources – none of which is of course any guarantee. Sources tend to be inaccurate, incomplete and/or biased because of prejudices or personal interest. The historian's answer is to collect as many independent, well-placed, contemporary sources as possible.

In our case, it is generally no problem to determine origin or authenticity. External source criticism is thus not a major concern. As for internal criticism, I will address the question of reliability first. With the sources I have used to document national demands and nationality policies, reliability is generally high. Most of them are public and institutional sources. Some of them (such as the stenographic records of parliamentary sessions) were produced under controlled circumstances, and thus have a strong claim to accuracy. It is more than likely that the stenographic reports closely resemble what was actually said in the Parliament (apart from the exception mentioned above), and that the interpellations have been correctly reprinted.

Official statistics is an important category of narrative sources. The quality of statistics will, of course, depend on the way the data have been collected, but I have no reason to believe that official statistics during the First Czechoslovak Republic were any less accurate than other such statistics. One exception is the habit of presenting Czechs and Slovaks as a Czechoslovak nation, irrespective of what people actually answered. Also other institutional sources that are used as narrative sources seem to have satisfactory credibility, unless otherwise noted.

15 There is little quantification involved on my part, since I mostly refer to already existing statistics. This is also the reason why I have not discussed quantitative techniques in this chapter.
Especially when the struggle over national identity is concerned, the sources are used mostly as *remnants*. These sources were often produced for other purposes: for instance, I have used official statistics on nationality to document Czechoslovakism. This is also an example of indirect use of sources. When we use written texts to infer something about values, attitudes, perceptions, intentions – or as in this case – identities, the problem is less a matter of reliability in terms of factual events, and more a matter of establishing whether the text is a reliable account of the actual values, attitudes, perceptions, or intentions of its author(s).

There are two potential problems. One is the lack of correspondence between the text (in terms of views, intentions, feelings, perceptions, arguments), and what the author "really" meant or thought. Was he being honest, or did he have other motives? Can we take the text at face value, or should we look for the hidden meaning? The question is not an easy one. We must take as our main point of departure that people normally mean what they say: to assume that people are always deceptive would make normal social intercourse and research quite impossible. On the other hand, it is obvious that people sometimes are less than honest, especially about their reasons for doing things.

Another potential problem is that the message may be ambiguous and/or inconsistent, and then it becomes hard to conclude anything at all about its "real" contents. Yet, apart from reflecting a confused mind, such inconsistencies and self-contradictions can also be seen as clues that can be used to resolve the first problem, as signs of "dishonesty." The point of the text may for instance be to make something come true by stating that it already is. Governments or national movements, for instance, sought to convince the people that they were one nation. When the agitation started, the claim was not true, but then it became true as people gradually accepted the message.

**More on interpretation**

Another aspect of internal source criticism besides evaluation of reliability concerns the interpretation of contents. Interpretation (of text, talk and behavior) is the qualitative method for processing of data, included in the tool kit of history, the social sciences and the arts. Approaches to interpretation vary considerably, however, from linguistics to history and the social sciences. In this thesis, texts are used to document a process, which means that I am concerned with the communicative and contextual functions of the text rather than the formal linguistic sides. My approach is probably closest to the historians' approach to text analysis, although I have used some elements from argument analysis, especially in my treatment of the struggle over national identity. And, despite all variations, there is a lot of common ground between the many approaches to text interpretation or analysis.

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17 Those elements are taken from Svennevig et al. (1995), Chapter 4.
*Hermeneutics* has its origins in the interpretation of biblical texts. Today it refers both to a method for interpretation of meaningful phenomena and to the conditions for understanding meaning. Hermeneutics as a method of interpretation is associated with the *hermeneutic circle*, where correct interpretation is based on interpreting the part in relation to the whole, the whole in relation to the part. This means that words and sentences must be analyzed in relation to the whole text, and that the text must be analyzed in relation to the context – time, place, institutional context and the intention of the author. The point of departure is that the meaning of texts (and other communicative actions) is not intrinsic, but must be interpreted in order to be understood; moreover, on average, more than one interpretation is possible. This then raises the question of choosing the "correct" interpretation among several, and the problem becomes greater, the more ambiguous the text is.

Gilje and Grimen mention two approaches to correct interpretation.\(^{18}\) One is text-oriented and holistic, based on consistency between the text and its constituent parts. However, there may be more than one interpretation that fits the requirement and more importantly, this approach assumes that texts are consistent, harmonious entities, which is in most cases far too strong an assumption. In fact, the inconsistencies are often interesting in themselves, as already mentioned. The other approach is actor-oriented, where correct interpretation is seen as an interpretation that corresponds to the intention of the author. Problems related to this approach are that the author's intentions can often only be ascertained through (language) acts that are in themselves in need of interpretation and that in many kinds of texts the intention of the author is not a major concern. A general problem, posed by relativism and more recently by post-modernism, is whether it is at all meaningful to speak of "correct" interpretation.

Historical method, with its emphasis on source criticism and the ambition to avoid bias, is based on the assumption that this is both meaningful and possible. The self-proclaimed post-modernist Keith Jenkings argues that history should not aim at "real knowledge of the past", but should be seen as "a discursive practice that enables present-minded people(s) to delve around and reorganise it appropriately to their needs." He bases his conclusion on the view that "there is no method of establishing incorrigible meanings: all facts to be meaningful need embedding in interpretive readings."\(^{19}\) First, he argues that there is no unpositioned criterion by which the degree of bias can be judged. This is based on the premise that objective re-creation of history is not possible and that history is a series of readings, all of which are positions. In other words: The scholar is embedded in the social structure of his own society.

Second, Jenkins argues that empathy is not possible, because there is no presuppositionless interpretation of the past, and interpretations of the past are constructed in the present. This is based on the premise that the differences between past and present assumptions and ways of thinking and acting are too great to be overcome, and that the scholar is embedded in the "idea world" of his own society and time. Finally, Jenkins argues that certainty is impossible,


because there are no "deeper" sources to draw on to get things right. Sources are mute, they speak only when called upon by the historian, and what kind of explanations the traces can be found to support will depend on how the historian organizes these traces of the past.

The last argument is valid enough, but the former two are based on a different kind of absolutism than the objectivism they challenge: that humans in general and scholars in particular are unable to understand people who are substantially different from themselves. This means that "the human will to bridge the gap between people, traditions, cultures" is neglected. According to post-modernism, nothing is certain – except that people are unable to transcend their social positions and the horizons of their time and society. The relativist "anything goes" is ill-suited as a point of departure for research, but this does not mean that criteria for correct understanding are easy to come by. In practical research, knowledge of the context, experience and power of judgment play an important role. Interpretations can never be certain – only more or less credible or convincing, based on the evidence that is presented.

It is common to distinguish between a linguistic interpretation, which means translating the meaning of a text from the original language of the source (whether this is foreign, archaic or plain everyday language) into a scholarly language, and a contextual or real interpretation; which seeks to answer the question: what does it mean? Meaning can be understood in three ways: as the intention of the author, as relevance for the reader and as a message to several readers. Finally, linguistic and contextual interpretation is combined in a reconstruction of the meaning of the text which includes a description of content, perceptions and tendencies, and which tends to emphasize structure and continuity.21

There are challenges related to each step in this process. Linguistic interpretation is not always easy, even in the cases where the author(s) of the text and the interpreter (scholar) belong to the same time and society. Words or terms may have different meanings in various social (sub)contexts, the text may contain self-contradictory or ambiguous elements, metaphors or irony may make the meaning of the text less obvious, etc. I do not have the benefit of sharing time or society with my sources, and some additional problems follow from this.

First, there is the problem of translating from Czech to English, neither of which is my native language. I clearly stand the risk of losing some nuances, since words tend to have slightly different connotations in different languages, even when a dictionary may list them as equivalent. Furthermore, not all the concepts that are lexicalized in Czech are lexicalized in English, and vice versa. Idiomatic expressions are a particular problem.22 Turning to the contextual or real interpretation, we encounter the problem of historical context. I am an outsider: do I know enough about Czechoslovak society in the inter-war era and the period

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22 I have tried to solve these problems by consulting various dictionaries, and when I have still had doubts, I have consulted Karen Gammelgaard, senior lecturer at the Department of East European and Oriental Studies of the University of Oslo.
preceding it to be able to get the "right" associations? This is a problem I realized at a very early stage, and it led me to take an overly long detour into Czech and Slovak history before I could make sense of the texts from the inter-war period that I was trying to interpret. I have tested my interpretations on Czech and Slovak historians, without whose kind help, my job would have been much more difficult.23

Second, the things that we take for granted may be a problem in research directed at foreign and/or past societies, because it can lead to false analogies and ethnocentrism. The question is then how "alien" this other society appears to us. There are of course various differences between Czechoslovakia in the inter-war years and Norway today – yet culturally, these differences are smaller than one might expect. Apart from the traditions that unite most Europeans,24 there are clear parallels in the development of national identity and their contents in the Norwegian and Czech/Slovak cases. These parallels may enable me to understand Czech and Slovak national identity from within, although there remains of course also a risk of making false analogies.

Being an outsider can, however, also be turned into an advantage. People tend to take things in their own society for granted, and because outsiders do not take the same things for granted, they may see things that insiders are blind to – which also means that case studies of foreign societies are implicitly comparative. In addition, outsiders may have an advantage in cases where strong internal conflicts or feelings are involved. National identities are often taken for granted, and being a foreigner allows me to see the Czecho-Slovak conflict from outside. Put differently, there is less risk of my being embedded in the society under study. The challenge may not be so much to bracket our own ideas and thoughts, as to find the resources in our own language and experience to enable us to understand what confronts us as alien, without imposing distorting prejudices on it. Gadamer argues that we should rather "recognize the distance in time as a positive and productive possibility of understanding."25

The most obvious danger in relation to the reconstruction of meaning is the danger of subconscious distortion of findings. This affects the inter-subjectivity of the results and thus the validity. Such distortion may take various forms. First, theories or preconceived ideas may make us overlook elements of the text that do not fit the picture, or we may "over-interpret" elements to make them fit. When texts are used indirectly, this danger is very real. It may involve reading into the text motives, meanings, or intentions that the author(s) never meant to convey or never even had. This type of bias tends to occur when models or theories are applied too rigidly (the "tyranny" of models).

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23 Thanks again to Alena Bartlová, Miroslav Hroch, Dušan Kovač, Eva Kowalská, Robert Kvaček, and Jan Rychlík.

24 These are "the heritage of Roman law, Judeo-Christian ethics, Renaissance humanism and individualism, Enlightenment rationalism and science, artistic classicism and romanticism, and above all, traditions of civil rights and democracy", according to Anthony D. Smith: National identity (1991:174).

Another danger is that, when looking for tendencies in a sample of texts, we may be led to exaggerate the consistency of our findings. The deviations from the "typical" pattern are then overlooked, and the pattern is made to appear clearer than it actually is. How we interpret the texts we are reading at present may e.g. be affected by the texts we have already read.

A third problem, and one that according to Silverman is rather common in qualitative research, is the tendency to select field data (quotations) that are conspicuous because they are exotic, at the expense of the less dramatic, but more typical. This is sometimes tempting. There are no simple solutions to any of these problems, other than to make sure that our conclusions can be corroborated by the text, and that our use of the text is systematic rather than anecdotal. One possible way of dealing with this in practical research is to look actively for the deviant cases, those at odds with the general tendency, and take a closer look at these in order to find out what makes them different and why. This is a suggestion Silverman makes in the case of interpretation of interview data, but it can be used also on historical sources.

A second strategy is to use simple quantification to validate impressions formed in the course of the interpretation process. In my case, this involved counting pages (in textbooks) and the number of times various topics with a bearing on the national question came up in interpellations and debates. Finally, in order to avoid "over-interpretation", we should also keep in mind that when people write, their message may be less than clear, their arguments inconsistent, and their choice of words impulsive. A little caution is thus warranted.

**Concluding remarks**

In this chapter, I have discussed some problems related to the collection and processing of data. Although this thesis has been written in the social science tradition, the methods for collection and use of sources are those of the historian, as, of course, are the problems. I have therefore addressed the kind of questions that apply to historical research, and my point of departure has been a critical approach to sources.

While the reliability of historical material concerns whether the text faithfully reports (1) what actually went on, how, where, when and by whom, (narrative sources) or (2) what the author actually meant or felt (remnants), the question of validity remains a question of correct ("fair" or "unbiased") interpretation. In this chapter I have sought to address some of the more general methodological problems. Throughout the remainder of this narrative, methodological problems will be discussed in the context in which they occur.

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