Collecting Sources for Social History.

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Sources for Social History: the trias informatica
Social scientists in the broadest sense of the word, including social historians, use many sources for their research. If possible, they try to collect the sources they need directly by conducting interviews or through participant observation, if not, they depend on recorded information in the form of artefacts, texts, images or sound, produced and collected by other persons. Basically, the digital revolution has not changed the picture, although many new "sources-in-the-making" – texts (including e-mails and text messaging), images and sounds – are now produced electronically and distributed over the Internet. In modern societies two institutions have traditionally taken care of the production, reproduction and distribution of such information sources: the state (through national, regional and local archives) and the mass media. However, there is also a third party involved in the form of academic institutions that collect (and reproduce) sources and documentation (mostly stemming from private persons or organizations) for research. It is the role of this third party that will be central to this symposium.

A well-functioning civil society depends on a system of checks and balances between these three main distributors of information: the *trias informatica*. State institutions, a free press and independent academic institutions operating together, but independently of each other, offer the best possible infrastructure for the blossoming of evidence-based social sciences and in particular of social history.[1] We stress the latter because the more we move into the past, the fewer the possibilities to rely on contemporary interviews, let alone on participant observation, and the more one has to rely on sources collected by others. Inherent to all these sources are problems of reliability, veracity and trust. Not only because all producers of information are biased, but also because all collecting institutions are biased as well. The main reasons for this are, of course, their political stance, the policies they pursue and the interests they represent. This not only holds true for state institutions such as state archives, but also for the mass media (commercial and public press, etc.), and for academic institutions. Besides, there are more sources of bias: firstly, the trend in the past decades of blurring lines between the three institutions due to the erosion of media independence; secondly, the mediatization of politics; and thirdly the politicizing of the social sciences, including social history, involving the shift from independent research to research commissioned by policy makers. Finally, the recent digital revolution gives an extra dimension to the problems of reliability, veracity and trust. The need to go back to the original source (text, image or sound) remains the same, but it is exacerbated by the ease of reproduction, redistribution and manipulation of electronic data. The need to check the authenticity of digital sources, as well as the definition of what authenticity means, has become an increasingly important issue.

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[1] *"*All useful descriptions of social reality are necessarily simultaneously `historical' (that is, they take into account not only the specificity of the situation but the continual and endless changes in the structures under study as well as in their environing structures) and `social scientific' (that is, they search for structural explanations of the longue durée, the explanations for which, however, are not and cannot be eternal)." – Immanuel Wallerstein, "From Sociology to Historical Social Science: Prospects and Obstacles", British Journal of Sociology, 51, 1 (January-March 2000), 25-35, at 34.

The role of independent academic Institutes

Contrary to the omnipresence of the press and the state and state controlled institutions like national libraries, state archives, statistical agencies and the like, free academic repositories of primary sources are rare and they offer a rather disparate landscape. In many countries they do not exist, in most others they play only a very modest role and only a few countries can really claim to have such a tripartite system.   Within the relatively small group of independent academic institutions of social history, the variety is wide. You have large organizations like the International Institute of Social History and the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, and small ones like the Archives of Indian Labour at Noida; you have institutes linked to political parties, like the German Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, or to universities, like the Paris-based BDIC or the KADOC in Nijmegen, or to NGO's like the Moscow-based Memorial; you have organizations geared to contemporary social action like the International Information Centre and Archives for the Women's Movement (IIAV) or to purely historical research like the IISH or the Belgian AMSAB-ISG; and you have different legal entities like individuals, foundations or societies. It is not difficult to see that the majority of the institutions in this field is concentrated in Western Europe and North America. As an indicator we may take the membership of the International Association of Labour History Institutions (IALHI) which covers 27 countries. The vast majority of its members (110 out of 126) are based in Europe and North America. Asia and Latin America and even more so Africa are hardly represented in this organization.

Similarly, the way these different institutions have built their collections shows a great variety of policies and results. In the period 1870-1914 three groups started important collections of social historical documentation:
– economic historians (1875: the Center for Historical Social Science Literature at the Hitotsubashi University, Tokyo; 1895: the London School of Economics; 1906: the Wirtschaftsarchiv, Cologne; 1914: the Netherlands Economic History Archives (NEHA), The Hague),
– the Labour Movement (1882: [German] Social-Democratic Party Archive, Bern; 1902: Arbetarrörelsens arkiv och bibliotek, Stockholm; 1906: the Tamiment Library, New York),
– and liberal and Christian politicians (1894: Musée Social, Paris; 1899: Centraal Bureau Sociale Adviezen, The Hague; 1906: Schweizerisches Sozialarchiv, Zurich).

During and after the First World War three still important institutions entered the field: in 1914 the BDIC, Paris, in 1919 the Hoover Institution, Stanford, and in 1921 the Marx-Engels Institute, Moscow. The spread of Fascism and Stalinism threatened people of all convictions within the labour movement, as well as their collections, and incited professor Nicolaas Posthumus, director of the afore-mentioned NEHA, to establish the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam (1935). During the Cold War several institutes of Marxism-Leninism came into being in the countries of the Warsaw Pact, and in the West, institutes such as the Archiv der sozialen Demokratie (Friedrich Ebert-Stiftung) in Bonn (1969), the Modern Records Centre in Warwick (1973) and the Fondazione Feltrinelli in Milan (1974) were established in the heighday of Marxism-inspired social science research and activism . After the East/West block divide was lifted, many new institutes came into being, e.g. in Spain, Greece, and in India, although it has to be admitted that many of these newer institutions lead a precarious existence.

The rescue function in global perspective

The history of all these institutes is deeply influenced by the need, felt by their founding fathers and their successors to rescue documentation from neglect, wilful annihilation and falsification. Notable examples from the history of the IISH can illustrate this. With the establishment of the institute in Amsterdam, Posthumus envisaged an independent, neutral, scholarly institution that was to function as a safe haven for threatened collections. He was fortunate to meet Nehemia de Lieme, director of De Centrale, an insurance company with close ties to the Social-Democratic movement. Its statutes required the donation of a part of its profits to the cultural aims of the labour movement. De Lieme became convinced of the importance of Posthumus' initiative and De Centrale supported the Institute on an extraordinary scale in the years preceding 1940. In these pre-war years, the anarchist collections of Max Nettlau were smuggled out of Fascist-ruled Austria. The CNT and FAI papers from Spain torn by the Civil War, the Marx and Kautsky papers from Nazi Germany and the Aksel'rod and Trotsky documents from Stalinist Russia found a safe haven in Amsterdam. In recent decades similar

considerations led to the building up of collections on the Tien An Men protests, and oppositional movements in countries like Turkey, Iran, Burma, Indonesia and Bangladesh.

Although actual considerations whether or not to save certain papers vary widely between institutes, periods in their histories and even individual staff members, common to all is that they have collected a substantial amount of irreplaceable source materials which otherwise would have been lost.

The need for a fundamental discussion
Because of the importance of the issues raised above, it is remarkable that so far not much debate has taken place on the role, socio-political and cultural background, and impact of the collecting activities of academic institutions of social history. Apart from some institutional histories and recollections of staff members of major institutes, a systematic reflection on this aspect of academia and its impact on the trias informatica is missing. It would be good, therefore, to bring together a group of experts in the field to discuss this theme on the basis of experience gained in the last century and to take a look at it from a global perspective. This symposium will hopefully start a new and fundamental discussion on the issues raised and we invite you to take part actively in this discussion, which will serve as a guideline to the IISH in the determination of its future collecting policies.

a. Academic considerations
Although many of the institutions described here have their roots in social and political movements and in the need to salvage endangered materials, sooner or later academics play a leading role in determining the policies of the institutions This inevitably creates a sensitivity to the academic traditions in a given field and to the ebb and flow of academic fashions and trends. If the decision on what to collect and what not is imagined as taking place within a triangle whose corners are the rescue function, the logic and continuity of the collection and perceived scientific importance, it is clear that the third corner (perceived scientific importance) is the one most open to change. This is also very visible in the history of the IISH, where an understanding of social history as the study of movements, thinkers and activists of the Left has given way to an emphasis on the comparative study of global labour relations. If the institute is to strengthen the links between its collecting side and its research side, a balance will have to be struck between sensitivity to developments in the world-wide field of social history on the one hand and insulation against short-term fashions and trends that may leave the collections with undesirable fragmentation on the other.

b. Political considerations
As stated in the introduction, political independence is a corner stone of the *trias informatica* and in a way the raison d'être of institutions like the IISH. Nevertheless, most institutions have political links. Sometimes these are evident, as in the case of Moscow's Marx-Engels Institute or most Scandinavian labour history archives, but the IISH, too, throughout its history has profited from non-institutional, but nevertheless strong, links with the Dutch Labour Party and the trade unions. In addition, most of the IISH's funding ultimately comes from the state (since 1979 through the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences). This potentially creates opportunities for political steering in the collecting, listing and classifying, and publishing. In addition, those in charge of the collections do have political feelings, and more often than not even very strong political convictions. That is one of the reasons why they wanted to work at the IISH in the first place. Sometimes they have been part of a movement, have collected the papers of their movement and subsequently have been hired to work on their collection after they donated them. Besides, those with inside-information on actual movements may also be the best placed to collect its documents. Examples from the Institute's history are the Kautskys and Nettlau, but also Lehning in a way. Although with the waning of the great social movements of the Twentieth Century this may have become less of a factor, there is still a need to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of relying on this type of collector, particularly, when contrasted with the role of academics.

c. Relationship between collections and research
Although on principle collection-building institutes may refrain totally from research and just open their treasures to outside users, in many cases they also conduct research in the field of social history, most often on the basis of their own collections. Sometimes this results in one-off publications, sometimes in journals or periodicals. A few of the institutions also have full-fledged research departments, like the IISH has had for more than two decades now. This raises questions as to the degree of interdependence of its collection building and research policies. In the history of the Institute varying answers have been formulated, lately the position of semi-independence has been defended: both collections and research have their own history, their own logic and their own specific environment. Yet, the building of the collection in part depends on the input of the researchers, and they make use of the collections. Most of the researchers obviously are from the wider field of social history and not from the IISH itself, and they also make their voices heard. Nevertheless, the degree of interdependence of, and synergy between the research department and the collection building department is something to be discussed, as is the ideal composition of the Institute's staff.

d. International considerations
We live in a world of national states and cultural heritage is often, and increasingly, conceived and defined in a strictly national way. That, after all, is why Greece wants back its Elgin marbles. Institutes with international collections therefore have something to explain. The ambitions of the IISH are truly international, both in the sphere of research and in the sphere of collecting, but that in itself leads to a paradox. On the one hand, its traditions imply that it engages itself to support efforts to salvage the historical legacy of social movements worldwide, which in many cases implies bringing over materials that are sensitive (both in a political and in a material sense) to Amsterdam. On the other hand, the traditions of internationalist solidarity of the institute also mean that, where possible, efforts should be made to make the materials available to those who need them most – the researchers in the different areas of the world in which the IISH is active. Building strong regional networks with IISH representation and "preferred partners" that are supported in their local role may be part of the answer, just as further strong investments in digitalization of the materials in the collections will allow the IISH to make them available to the users in the country of origin, in a sense "giving them back to the world." It should also be noted that institutes like the IISH, with a predilection for oppositional, and often radical, movements can act as safe havens for the legacy of those movements, precisely by removing them from their country of origin. To take one example from the Institute's collections: the papers pertaining to the German Rote Armee Fraktion have not been deposited in Germany for obvious reasons. However, in taking this stance, the Institute has questions to answer from authorities and a general public concerned with national safety.

The future
What will the future look like for the IISH and similar institutions? It seems safe to depart from the idea that for one or more generations to come national states will be the key players – notwithstanding globalization of all sorts. Let us suppose for a moment that there will be enough democracies amongst them where our sort of institutes can exist. If that is the case, the ideal of the *trias informatica* will remain the underlying imperative. At the same time, competing and conflicting forces just mentioned (academic, political and international) will remain important. The question on the table is how best to develop the IISH as a collection-building institution with a global role in this landscape of the future, to develop a coherent vision that can be translated into clear choices in terms of mission, organisation, and resource allocation. It is for this that we solicit your advice.