Workshop: Contemporary historians and the re-use of social science-generated data sets: An international dialogue on the challenges presented by 'social data'

German Historical Institute London: 28-29 October 2021

Organized by the DFG-Projekt 'Sozialdaten als Quellen der Zeitgeschichte. Erstellung eines Rahmenkonzeptes für eine Forschungsdateninfrastruktur in der zeithistorischen Forschung'

Historians working on the second half of the 20th century are increasingly confronted with new types of sources: so-called social data. They are the remains of state-sponsored data collection or social science and humanities research projects – such as tax data, polls, interviews or recorded participant observations. In the course of the 'scientization' of the social that took place in the twentieth century, these sources have become ever more numerous and complex, but they often present in obsolete formats such as punch cards, old statistical software or magnetic tapes. They can also include tables, texts, card indexes, transcriptions, video interviews, questionnaires, photographs, etc. These sources may be found in retired scientists' or pollsters' attics rather than in state archives, and their re-use may present unresolved questions of ownership and data protection. If scholars of the contemporary social, gender and economic history of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are to do justice to their task of providing a critical appraisal of the recent past, they cannot bypass social data as a source. They have to tackle the ethical, legal, methodological, and conceptual challenges tied to these heterogenous, complex, research-generated sources. To date, the re-use of social data by contemporary historians is still rare, but this is bound to change over the coming decade. At present, historians often have to put considerable effort and expense into making social data accessible, and classifying and processing them for re-evaluation. Legal questions arise: who do the data belong to? Do the ethical standards and data protection regulations in force when the data were collected permit their use by historians? Which methods do we choose to anonymise and re-classify sources, and to what extent should we pursue individual cases across different datasets? To

what extent does the use of social data render historians' accounts more 'representative'? In addition, the context in which the sources were created is often only incompletely documented, and most historians lack training in the statistical skills and software required for the re-use of many such social data sets. This workshop at the GHI London aims at an international dialogue between curators of data, contemporary historians, digital humanities experts, and practitioners in related social science disciplines. It takes stock of existing projects in the field of social and cultural history (broadly defined) and aims to compare approaches, methods and archival holdings across national boundaries.

Workshop schedule

Thursday, 28 October

1.30-2.00 p.m. Welcome and Introduction

2.00-4.30 p.m.

Panel 1: Re-use of qualitative / life history interviews (Chair: Pascal Siegers)

Paper 1, Jane Gray (Maynooth University, Ireland) – Re-visiting social science data to understand social change

Paper 2, Clemens Villinger (GESIS, Cologne) – Researching Consumer Responsibility in East Germany and the responsible re-use of qualitative social data

Paper 3, Mary Stewart (British Library Sound Archive, London) and Charlie Morgan (British Library Sound Archive, London) – Archiving oral history to enable re-use

Comment: Kerstin Brückweh (Beuth University of Applied Sciences, Berlin)

5.00-7.30 p.m.

Panel 2: Survey data as sources for social history (Chair: Sabine Reh)

Paper 1, Mor Geller (Hebrew University of Jerusalem) – Cinema Research and Socialist Imaginations: East German film audience research as historical source

Paper 2, Marcus Böick (Ruhr-University Bochum) – Historical Research as Investigative Journalism? The Quest for a Lost Interview Project
Paper 3, Moritz J. Feichtinger (University of Bern) – "The greatest social-science laboratory we have ever had!": Computational psychographics during the War for South Vietnam and its remains

Comment: Christina von Hodenberg (German Historical Institute, London)

Friday, 29 October

10.00 a.m. – 12.30 p.m.

Panel 3: Writing educational history using social data (Chair: Kerstin Brückweh)

Paper 1, Irena Saleniece (Daugavpils University, Latvia): Latvian Teachers of the 1940s–1960s: The Use and Reuse of Oral Evidence

Paper 2, Sabine Reh (DIPF/BBF Berlin), Eckhard Klieme (DIPF/Frankfurt) – Teaching cultures in the 1990s after German reunification: The political and educational importance of differences between the West and the East

Paper 3, Fiona Courage (University of Sussex/Mass Observation Archive) – Mass-Observing education: interpreting other people's lives

Comment: Pascal Siegers (GESIS, Cologne)

1.30 – 4.00 p.m.

Panel 4: Social Data in Economy and Labour history (Chair: Clemens Villinger)

Paper 1, Alexander Nützenadel (Humboldt University Berlin) – Economic History and the Behavioral Turn: What can we learn from surveys and other social data?

Paper 2, Benoît Majerus (C2DH Luxembourg) and Lars Wieneke (C2DH Luxembourg) – Making shell companies visible. Digital history as a tool to unveil global networks and local infrastructures

Paper 3, Michael Whittall (Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen) – Historical Co determination Developments in the Eastern part of Germany: The Question of Data

Comment: Lutz Raphael (University of Trier)
4.30-5.30 p.m.

Concluding Comment: Andreas Fickers (C2DH Luxembourg)

(Discussion Chair: Christina von Hodenberg)