Approaches to Reanalysis: Piecing Together the Past with Available Sources

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Historians rely on a variety of sources to guide their research and piece together the history of events, people and societies they study. Primary sources, and in particular written documents from the time period being observed are crucial to historians in establishing an accurate notion about the topic they study. However, when people and societies without written languages or record keeping are being examined this creates challenges for historians.

Ethnohistorians meet these challenges by using methodologies intended to offset this discrepancy or lack of recorded and written sources. While any process that achieves this constitutes a methodology, there are several common approaches which are applicable in most cases. In the case of European entrance and interaction in the Americas, reanalysis of sources is a popular methodology. This method involves consulting European sources for information about the Native population and attempting to establish the Native perspective.

Susan E. Ramirez utilizes this methodology in *The World Upside Down: Cross-Cultural Contact and Conflict in Sixteenth-Century Peru.* Ramirez focuses largely on Spanish documents pertaining to the Curacas, individuals who governed regional and local areas on behalf of the Incas.[1] Most of the book is focused on four major areas of influence held by the Curacas and the Spanish efforts to manipulate and subvert that influence. These were: political authority, ideas of land ownership and use, revenue and services for the state, and differences regarding religious and sacred beliefs.[2]

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[1] Susan E. Ramirez, *The World Upside Down: Cross-Cultural Contact and Conflict in Sixteenth-Century Peru* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 3-4

[2] Ramirez, *The World Upside Down,* 7-9

Since each of these would have involved Curacas and affected their relationship with their Incan superiors as well as their subjects, there are many Spanish colonial records in the form of administrative and court records.[3] Ramirez applies the methodological approach of reanalysis of sources by determining what the Spanish records state and comparing them with the Native responses to the decisions mentioned in those sources.[4]

Due to the lack of written sources from the Native outlook and the thorough documentation of the Spanish, this methodology uses readily available sources to establish what occurred during the initial contact with the Spanish and the ensuing colonial environment. Additionally, Ramirez's focus on Native reactions indicates what Andean culture was like before the arrival of the Spanish and their subsequent documentation of events.[5] Hence, this methodology as applied by Ramirez uses the large amount of existing Spanish documents rather than disregarding them.

Ramirez is similar to other historians in her use of the vast colonial records kept by the Spanish. Though her attention to the reactions of the Native population is not unique, this is not always considered during reanalysis. This appears to be a major strength of her methodology and can solidify the Spanish perspective while gathering strong evidence for the position of the Incas. However, even with careful consideration of the Native response, a weakness with Ramirez's use of reanalysis is that she is largely surmising of one side of the story.

Camilla Townsend uses the same methodology in *Burying the White Gods: New Perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico.* This article focuses on the conventional narratives

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[3] Ramirez, *The World Upside Down,* 3-4, 12
[4] Ramirez, *The World Upside Down,* 13, 88, 121-122
[5] Ramirez, *The World Upside Down,* 9-10

regarding the conquest of Mexico and seeks to offer other perspectives based on an analysis of sources.[6] Not unlike Ramirez, Townsend focuses on Spanish documents with attention to Native perspectives and responses. However, a notable difference is that rather than placing a large emphasis on Native responses, Townsend consults Spanish sources and considers the more apparent Spanish motives.[7]

Townsend begins the article by explaining the popular accounts of the Spanish arrival and eventual occupation of Mexico.[8] She then outlines the inaccuracies within these descriptions and proceeds to offer evidence in the form of Spanish and Native records to present arguments to the contrary.[9] Many of the sources were created by conquistadors, Franciscan apostles and Native nobility in the form of testimonies, writings and codices.[10]

As with Ramirez, Townsend is cognizant of the inconsistency in written sources from the Native perspective and acknowledges this early in the article.[11] Much of Townsend's focus is on the detailed accounts of what the Spanish actions and beliefs were during their time in Mexico.[12] In this sense, she is quite literally applying the methodology of reanalysis by using existing sources and looking different information within them.

One particular strength in her application of reanalysis is that it can be taken more literally than works that compare and contrast such as Ramirez. With proper consideration for

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[6] Camilla Townsend, "Burying the White Gods: New Perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico," *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 3 (June 2003): 660-663. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/529592
[7] Townsend, "Burying the White Gods," 664-665
[8] Townsend, "Burying the White Gods," 659-660
[9] Townsend, "Burying the White Gods," 660-662, 665-666
[10] Townsend, "Burying the White Gods," 664-666
[11] Townsend, "Burying the White Gods," 666
[12] Townsend, "Burying the White Gods," 668-669

the circumstances that these sources were created under, there is less speculation in determining what the sources were intended to express. Spanish, and Native sources if properly translated, are deliberately stating information for a specific reason. However, this is subject to the same consideration for limitations of the source such as bias or context.

Townsend is able to construct a strong argument by pointing out that most of her sources have already been used by other scholars.[13] She establishes that even Spanish sources explicitly state, or at least indicate what their motives were in Mexico.[14] By taking this approach to the reanalysis methodology, she is essentially arguing that "they said it themselves" ultimately directing any critiques back to the sources. In addition to being a strength, her reliance on the literal interpretation of sources is also the main weakness of her methodology because it heavily favors one side.

Francisco Garrido and Soledad Gonzalez offer a slightly different use of reanalysis in *Adaptive Strategies during Times of Conflict and Transformation: Copiapo Valley under the Spanish Conquest in the Sixteenth Century.* Their main focus is on the warfare strategies of indigenous societies in northern Chile during the Spanish conquest.[15] Archeological sources comprise the majority of their sources but for contextualization they examine Spanish cornicles and documentation of the conflicts.[16]

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[13] Townsend, "Burying the White Gods," 663-664

[14] Townsend, "Burying the White Gods," 682-683

[15] Francisco Garrido and Soledad Gonzalez, "Adaptive Strategies during Times of Conflict and Transformation: Copiapo Valley under the Spanish Conquest in the Sixteenth Century," *Ethnohistory* 67, no. 1 (January, 2020): 127-128, doi:10.1215/00141801-7888777.

[16] Francisco Garrido and Soledad Gonzalez, "Adaptive Strategies during Times of Conflict and Transformation," 128-130

This article uses similar approaches to reanalysis as Townsend and Ramirez. First is the combination of archaeological and colonial documents, similar to Ramirez but with a heavier emphasis on the archaeological sources. Secondly is their focus on the Spanish written documents and their outward meaning much like Townsend's approach. Their use of archaeological evidence means that Garrido and Gonzalez do not have to rely as heavily on the written sources. However, they do make affective use of the written sources to either reinforce or explain the archaeological information.

Much of the article is structured around what the archaeological evidence suggests and the written sources guide the chronology. As with Townsend's article, the Spanish written sources also highlight the major cultural differences and technological disparities.[17] Just as with Townsend's article, the reliance on Spanish sources offers a strong argument for one perspective and a less certain understanding about the other. Similar to Ramirez's approach, these uncertainties can be offset to a degree by the more solid archeological evidence. Overall, Garrido and Gonzalez offer an interesting and strong use of reanalysis by incorporating different components of the methodology.

Each of these authors use reanalysis in a unique way and demonstrate some of the universal strengths and weaknesses of the methodology. They also show the importance of informing the reader about these limitations and explain what actions they take to mitigate them. Comparing and contrasting these three works provides a comprehensive overview of reanalysis as a methodology in Ethnohistory.

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[17] Francisco Garrido and Soledad Gonzalez, "Adaptive Strategies during Times of Conflict and Transformation," 128-130

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