Chapter One.

Historical documents: an explanation or a story?

Issues of objectivity, meaning, authority and representation are indisputably at the core of any assessment of an historical document. Academic focus and understanding of the issues have changed over time so that they remain of interest to scholars. Researchers now encounter contrasting positions about the concepts and new problems emerge because of those differences. This chapter outlines some of the differing opinions in relation to document evaluation, particularly for historical censuses, and establishes the rationale for my research. It helps to clarify my reading of other literature and it determines my approach to the Philippines Census data on women and their occupations. I do not intend the survey to be a study of any of the concepts, nor is it my intention to make any general judgement about the opposing positions that the survey sketches.

Two essays have been instructive and instrumental to my task of thinking about the evaluation of an historical census. One, written by Joan Scott in 1984 and republished in her book, *Gender and the Politics of History* (1988), examines a French statistical survey compiled in 1848. The other is part of a chapter in the second edition of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1991). He regards the colonial census as one of three institutions that eventually contributed to emerging nationalism in Southeast Asian states. Scott considers an interpretation of the political economy in a particular place at a particular time, whereas Anderson concentrates on the racial categorisation of colonial states over a defined period of time. Although both authors tend to serve their individual purposes, each accuses the respective historical censuses of teleology, questioning the subjectivity, intent and style of writing of the original compilers. They apply current theory to past events and invoke concepts whose meaning has altered over time. Both scholars therefore question the meaning and referential use of a census and the significance of the document. Both authors also challenge orthodox meanings of reality and representation and in so doing, they challenge the conceptualisation of a census. Partly because of their different content and partly because this exercise is not intended to compare and contrast the two papers, I will discuss separately the particular issues arising from each that are relevant to my

argument. This chapter examines Scott's essay with reference to the conceptual issues she raises in relation to the assessment of historical documents. The next chapter examines Anderson's hypothesis in the context of the specific circumstances, construction and meaning of the 1903 Philippines Census.

Scott's essay examines the means and extent to which a statistical report could represent a conditional, imaginary and imposed view of workers for political ends. Her work deals with the way in which representation was used to define reality and the effect of accepting statistical data as sacrosanct. Her own aim is ideological. She rejects the conventional interpretation as prejudiced against workers and contends that by accepting the report's purported objectivity, we unintentionally reproduce the politics of the day. By thoroughly examining the context, categories and rhetoric of the document, Scott shows how the Chamber of Commerce report relied upon the authority of science to place and legitimise its own version of the world of work and social organisation. She argues that its statistics were not accurate or objective and their status as fact was uncertain. The report, in her opinion, therefore created a myth substantiating the Chamber's claim to their preferred political, economic and social setting. In this way, she shifts the focus from the content of the report to its representation of supposed reality.

Since Scott has written her paper, emphasis on the explanation and meaning of documents has subordinated ideals of objectivity, reason, or the truth of statements. Accordingly, post-structuralist human geography (including historical geography) and history no longer consider the latter notions accessible or supportable (N. Smith 1992). Instead, scholars consider all knowledge to be socially constructed, political and perspectival representation. Reality, redefined as a social (linguistic) construct, is absorbed into representation and any connection between representation and life in the material world is removed. There is on the one hand a preoccupation with symbolism (for example, of gender, space, memory, or experience) and the power of language. Such scholarship blurs the distinction between fact and fiction and between text and context, rejects any universalist or functionalist tendencies and the idea of theory, and bypasses any inferences of causality. On the other hand, it leads to assertions about subjectivity, pluralism, identity, the politics of difference, a cultural determinism of space and place and criticism of the form of ideas. The Kantian dilemma, as Smith notes, remains unsolved. If reality, including space and time, does not exist outside the

mind or language, how do we know and express that reality without it being self-referential, or reduced to a language game?

Here, although it is now dated, Scott's essay remains useful. Her work combines orthodox historical practice with the then newly emerging, post-structuralist approach (Sewell 1990). First, she investigates what happened in the report and how it showed subjectivity, then suggests why it was compiled in that manner and what it meant, as in a more conventional, humanistic history (Martin 1993, 1997). Scott alleges, for example, that the authors' capitalist beliefs influenced the occupational representation of workers. As an illustration of this, she contends that the report incorrectly categorised poor craft workers and women as entrepreneurs, when instead they were labourers or wage earners often working in small, household businesses. The misrepresentation reflected, in her opinion, a perceived political need to convey the impression of economic stability and growth in a time of disorder. To this extent, Scott retains the underlying aim of contesting the purported objective status of a statistical report about the labour market participation of real people in a complex world. In this conventional history therefore, as Martin (1993) suggests, it would be argued that the report was significant because it was an instance of the wider phenomenon of class exploitation.

On the other hand, Scott's concentration on the representation and subjectivity of the report prepares the way for an alternative analysis and interpretation of its meaning. To this end, she challenges the constructed, fixed nature of the language and the intended role of the report[1]. Workers were victims subjugated by the categories and rhetoric of the document, she alleges, to reinforce conservative social values and ideology. For example, in her opinion the authors were preoccupied with single women working as seamstresses or prostitutes, whom she believes the authors saw as unregulated, dissolute and subverting the precise count of the workforce. The representation of the women, Scott asserts, indicated an encoded text that warned about the loose morality of the dependent, subordinated working class. Thus, Scott argues that the language of the report, construed as part of the context, defined a social reality that was biased, illusory and became part of history. From this perspective, the significance of the report lay in the consequence of the event (Martin 1993). The statistical representation was fixed and became accepted as truth. If we accept the political power exerted in the 1848 report as the true and final measure of our

subsequent knowledge, we consequently condone the politics of the time according to Scott.

The subjectivity, discontinuity and uncertainty of knowledge are now regarded as accepted, despite the inherent contradiction, by those who support social constructionism (the term is from Driver 1995). Yet, academic literature has not erased the subject of objectivity. Even while positivist aims of "objective" knowledge are refuted, scholars continue to argue amongst themselves about the concept and its nature in relation to past narratives and on what criteria we should judge it[2]. Demeritt (1996) concludes, "Debates about objectivity are debates about what will count for real knowledge of the world" (p. 499). The critique of objectivity and representation is useful in pointing out the need for openness to other positions including that of past authors. It means careful examination of our own assumptions as well as those of other scholars, and recognition of the implications of taking any representation for granted. It alerts us that power relationships can effectively exclude the voices of many. It also reminds us that all knowledge of history and human geography is social or human, not neutral knowledge. On these grounds, critical scrutiny of a document's objectivity remains a legitimate and necessary part of historical practice. At the same time, the critique does not resolve the question of subjectivity/relativism any further, and downplays the fact and technical problems of research in favour of persuasion (Grafton and Marchand 1994).

The debate about objectivity and relativism mirrors one of the wider problems identified in current research. There is confusion between the form of an idea and the idea itself, of the relationship between the nature of objects and the social knowledge of them. Opposing views about nature and society mean there is very little agreement between advocates. It is either argued that there is a separate, natural world on which we can base our detached representation, or that representation creates reality and the two are indistinguishable. The literature discusses the problem in different terms. Some scholars consider concept and structure, whether theoretical frameworks can be attributed a material reality (Sayer 1993; Curthoys 1997). Others ponder text and context, whether or how representations reflect the truth of the world (Livingstone 1992; Demeritt 1994, 1996; Spiegel 1990). Still others reflect upon the object of study compared with study of the object, what counts as knowledge and how it comes to be counted (Sewell 1990; Pratt 1993; but see Scott 1991 for an alternative view of the

object of study). Studies of historical documents typify the confusion and disagreement between the opposing views.

Scott's (1988) essay illustrates the overall problem. She tends to confuse the form of an idea and the idea itself. For example, she contends that the theoretical framework of a particular belief had a material reality. Nineteenth century political economy, she states, was "a doctrine that claimed the status of science, and thus a truth value that stood outside human construction or control" (p. 126). She tends therefore to disparage the views of the report's authors and the status of the report by referring to the alleged cause of, in her opinion, the authors' wrong beliefs (Curthoys 1997). The form of the idea was, is, as a set of abstract ideas in the form of a theory about the economic aspects (particularly distribution) of government, or in Marxist terms, apportioning the surplus amidst relationships of class power. The doctrine itself of political economy as applied in the mid-nineteenth century might well have included an assertion of its objective, scientific status among its principles, but that did not constitute the form of the idea. Because the theory is a concept, judgement as to it being right or wrong should not be applied, Curthoys (1997) argues. Nevertheless, Scott makes a value judgement, which influences her interpretation and the emphasis of her essay. It does not help to explain any cause of the workers' disadvantage.

A published census is an existing, material artefact, made up of tables of figures and written summaries of methods and end results. Post-structuralist scholars consider such documents as being no different from literary texts, part of the contingent, discursive formation of society, and from which the meaning of their production must be uncovered. Placing emphasis on the representation, they ask how the text caused and became a consequence of its own social reality. Scott queries, for example, how the discourse affected the document's form as well as its message when she claims that the statistical report defined and gave meaning to work. Spiegel (1990) argues that this glosses over a problem of ascribing meaning to an object, an artefact, which has no meaning until later researchers bestow it. If an historical document is regarded as a literary text, then a reduction of text to incommensurable historical context has occurred. We cannot judge the meaning of one, a material object, Spiegel reasons, by recourse to the other, "history" (the past) as reality, when it simply does not exist as uncontested truth. The exercise becomes a form of Whiggish history, so castigated by Livingstone (1992).

Third, Scott centres her analysis not on the particular groups of Parisian citizens she uses as examples, but instead substitutes a study of the document for the object of study. The perspective also influences her interpretation of the meaning of the document. Her focus conforms to the post-structuralist theory that it cannot be known if there is any correspondence to a constructed reality, which may not have existed – the view that "nothing lies outside the text". It appears to mean that statements by respondents, describing for example their age, sex or occupation (their "constructed experience"), written down by enumerators in a pre-determined system of language codes then transformed into another code as statistics, are to be regarded as unreality since their meaning has as yet been uncovered. Capitulation to nihilism on this scale appears absurd, leading nowhere. An alternative is to accept that, although we can no longer verify the past, the representations of humans and their characteristics recorded in a census do correspond somewhat to reality. It follows that the human presence in the document creates an object of study, that is, the complexity and significance of the daily life of men, women and children and their struggle for survival. Scott acknowledges the same point when she notes in passing the usefulness of a statistical report despite her divergence from this real world perspective. But a reality view rests on mental images of nature and society in the first place and therein lies some of the circularity and confusion of the debate.

Furthermore, if a census is seen to reflect the presence of humans with particular demographic characteristics, living and working in a real world and who all behave in different ways, then their presence imparts a material significance, its meaning, to the document. Cronon (1994), for example, perceives that there is very little sense in uncovering the meaning of a document if the content has little relationship to reality. His argument that accuracy of records is important seems particularly so for a population census liable to human fallibility. Moreover, we cannot dismiss the statistics or the lives of men, women and children so recorded as inconsequential in order that we might concentrate on just the meaning of the text. Their presence implies a capacity to influence as well as be affected by surrounding economic, social, political and physical environments. Those settings include the taking of a census and I will refer to the possible influence of Filipino women on the Census in my investigation. Last, without that human presence, the very notion of a population census would be meaningless.

The census document is therefore more than just an imaginary object or a literary text. By accepting the real world approach, it means that we respect the integrity of the document that we have received (Spiegel 1990). That means we respect the views of the authors without assuming them to be wrong or misguided. It does not imply that we should uncritically accept as transparent the language, rhetoric, categories or statistics used by all those involved in the census process. A population census is a concrete artefact that portrays people in a real context, but the document must necessarily be subjective since it is an expression of human thought and action. The portrayal of the people represented should be investigated and possible explanations for likely misrepresentation explored, although we can make no judgement about authorial beliefs. We need to uncover exactly whose presence the representation suppressed, how it happened and evaluate the justification for it. Detailed investigation of the census evidence including the statistical content might provide clues to such possible misrepresentation. While earlier research challenged the technical accuracy of the Philippines Census, literature to which I shall return in Chapter **3,** none considered the nature or content of the surveys from these perspectives of subjectivity, representation or significance.

Scott's paper therefore encourages the reader to consider conceptual issues about the evaluation of a census document. In her paper's construction, content and interpretation, she demonstrates the polarity of the academic debate about nature and society. The essay points to the significance of objectivity and representation in a real world context, suggesting the consequences of actions in society. In this light, the meaning of the document may be seen as an instance of a general social phenomenon. At the same time, Scott exhibits a revised view through her narrative that underlines the subjectivity and meaning of the document. Here, where authorial intentions and the view that representation created reality are predominant, the meaning or significance of the document lies in its being consequential. Thus, her paper indicates the advisability of considering the human presence in the census as well as a study of the document as a text. This also points to the difficulty, which Scott senses, of evaluating contrasting claims to representative authority. Her paper then sets out the ensuing effects of the chosen assessment.

There is no easy solution to the problem of representative authority when competing claims are likely. When we recognise that census officials cannot represent

the surveyed population in an historical document, we imply that only Filipino women, to use my example, are able to write their own history. By inference, it also means that we cannot represent census officials or claim to know their beliefs. That tends to limit the evaluation of historical documents, although a new approach may be possible. We can examine the criteria used by the authors in making their judgements about the population and, for example, their occupations. By investigating the rules and standards of measurement, their consistency of application and the contradictions and omissions in the selection, collation and publication of information, we might assess the conclusions the authors made. It does not restrict investigation to only the document's context of production, a claim to representative authority, or the purpose of the document and it allows an evaluation of the report as a piece of evidence. It complies with a real world perspective. This approach, supported by Denoon (1997) and Borofsky (2000), forms the foundation for my study. Scrutiny of the actual role of the census in representing Filipino women and their occupations in this way might also indicate another view of the significance of the documents. It might thus provide a further point of reference for future discussion about Philippines-United States contact.

Academic debate about whether to privilege real world accounts or discursive, political constructions has been described as a dead-end exercise (Livingstone 1992; Frader 1995). My purpose has not been to revisit all the arguments in that debate so that I might reach any satisfactory conclusion, which in itself is unlikely. Instead, my intention has been to use some of the issues in the literature as a means to justify my focus. Scott's essay, which encapsulates some of the confusion and difficulties met in the process of assessing a statistical document, alerts the reader to the relevant issues and promotes consideration of possible alternative interpretations. Anderson (1991), on the other hand, restricts his argument to an interpretation of the intended role of colonial population censuses. The next chapter examines Anderson's hypothesis and discusses the establishment of the American Census instrument in the Philippines.

---

[1] Some perspectives deny the intent and consciousness of the author, by maintaining that language, a codified system of impersonal, pre-existing signs, governs individual expression, experience and writing (Scott 1991). This dispossesses humans of will. In contrast, Martin (1993) outlines the reasons why historians should query authorial intent.

[2] See for example, Bevir (1994); Cronon (1994); Demeritt (1996); Driver (1992); Joyce (1998); Martin (1993, 1997); Martin, Scott and Stout (1995).