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FAMILY ARCHIVES AND
HISTORICAL RESEARCH

MARIA DE LURDES ROSA
RITA SAMPAIO DA NÓVOA
ALICE BORGES GAGO
MARIA JOÃO DA CÂMARA
(COORDS.)

FRANCIS X. BLOUIN JR.

University of Michigan

fblouin@umich.edu

ORCID: 0000-0001-9868-6300

EPILOGUE: A PERSPECTIVE ON THE ARCHIVAL DIVIDE

ABSTRACT: At a time not long ago, historians and archivists could be said to occupy a common conceptual space. In recent decades, this conceptual partnership began to diverge. On the one hand, the discipline of History has broadened the range of what questions legitimately constitute a systematic examination of the past. The boundaries that defined the province of historical scholarship, once so tightly drawn around states and institutions, were expanding. The search for validation in forming a response to those questions has pushed historians into new constructs of what constitutes a legitimate and an authoritative historical source. At the same time the world of archives and archival administration was changing in response to pressures derived from the complexities of modern life. Among those were 1) the problem of the bulk of records, 2) the challenge of finding resources for archival operations, and 3) the onslaught of new information technologies. These developments moved archival work away from a traditional focus on professional historical work. The convergence in the disciplines of History and of Archival Science once considered in full partnership has resulted in divergent conceptual frameworks for understanding historical documentation; between the evolving conceptual frameworks for historical research and those related to the efficient and practical retention of records.

Keywords: archives administration; information technology; historical source; historiography

RESUMO: Até recentemente, poderíamos afirmar que historiadores e arquivistas ocupavam um espaço conceptual em comum. Nas últimas décadas, essa parceria conceptual começou a divergir. Por um lado, a História, como disciplina, ampliou o leque de questões que considerou legitimamente constituírem um exame sistemático do passado. As fronteiras que definiam a província da História, em tempos tão rigidamente delimitada pelos Estados e pelas instituições, começaram a expandir-se. A busca por validação na formação de uma resposta a essas questões levou os historiadores a novas formulações sobre o que constitui uma fonte histórica legítima e autorizada. Ao mesmo tempo, o mundo dos arquivos e da administração arquivística estava em mutação, em resposta às pressões derivadas da complexidade da vida moderna. Entre elas contam-se 1) o problema da quantidade de documentos, 2) o desafio de encontrar recursos para as operações arquivísticas e 3) a

investida de novas tecnologias da informação. Estes desenvolvimentos afastaram o trabalho arquivístico do foco tradicional, o labor histórico profissional. A convergência entre as disciplinas História e Arquivística, antes pensada enquanto parceria plena, resultou em estruturas conceptuais divergentes para o entendimento da documentação histórica; entre estruturas conceptuais em evolução para a investigação histórica e aquelas relacionadas com uma preservação de documentos eficiente e pragmática.

Palavras-chave: administração de arquivos; tecnologias da informação; fonte histórica; historiografia

Like so many dimensions of modern life, archives and documentation once considered ordered and uncomplicated have been transformed by new uses, new definitions, and new technologies. My particular interest focuses on the institution of the archives itself and limits of the archives in supporting and authenticating the process of generating historical knowledge; that is the accumulation of recorded information generated in the course of activities conducted by those who lived before us. Archives are often viewed as static places, often characterized in the words of Carolyn Steedman as “dust”-ridden accumulations of documents¹. Some years ago William Rosenberg (a historian of Russia and user of complex archival accumulations of the Soviet Era) and I (a historian of the US and a long-time administrator of a substantial historical archive) collaborated on a reflection about the nature of archives and their changing relationship to how History is written and understood². We found extraordinary dynamism in the evolution of what constitutes an archive and how the contents of an archive shape and are shaped by historical discourse. We also found extraordinary dynamism in the evolution of the profession of History and how perspectives on the past are informed by sources in a variety of ways. Archives are certainly anything but dust-ridden, static institutions.

The essential problem we saw was one of convergence and divergence. That is to say that the convergence in the disciplines of History and of Archival Science once considered in full partnership had diverged into separate conceptual spheres each with a view of the other that was a century old. This is what we called the “archival divide”. In this brief paper, I want to explore

¹ STEEDMAN, 2001.

² BLOUIN JR.; ROSENBERG, 2011. See also BLOUIN JR.; ROSENBERG (eds.), 2006.

what we mean by the archival divide. That is, to look at specific questions that inspired our collaboration. What is the archival divide? How has it evolved? How does it manifest both in the historiographical and archival discourse? Has the recent rebirth of archival science as an autonomous discipline seeking to define its own problematics and objects of study contributed to the divide?

In 2002, the New York Public Library mounted an exhibition on the evolution of modern Literature. The exhibit was predicated on the following observation:

The Victorian era encompassed a wide variety of approaches to literary expression characterized by one common feature — the omniscient narrator's imagined world was, in essence, the same world [...] inhabited by the reader. Supporting this assumption was a system of widely held religious and social beliefs. Like all communities of belief, it was dependent on authority. [...] But by the 1920s as the American expatriate T. S. Eliot observed, such a role had become untenable. The gap between high and low culture had grown too great; religious certainties, at least among the cultural elite, had thoroughly corroded; and writers doubted that the world could be described, in any meaningful way, except in terms of their own, or their characters' interior reactions to it³.

This lack of common authorities and increased complexities separated authors and their readers into different realms of discourse and context. A relationship that seemed almost axiomatic, that of an author and the reader, became problematized.

For many decades, at least since the mid-nineteenth century, historians and archivists could also be said to occupy a common conceptual space. This, based on widely held assumptions that the basis of History could be found in institutions and the great men who ran them. These might be state institutions, religious institutions, private institutions and even the institu-

³ GERWITZ, 2002.

tion of the family⁴. Nevertheless there was a shared sense that understanding the history of those institutions and those who ran them would inform society and encourage wise choices based on historical perspective. Archives of those institutions and the papers of individuals who ran those institutions informed this historical work. The work of historical research and the work of administering archives existed in a conceptual harmony formed by similar institutional authorities. However, in recent decades, like the experience in Literature, the common authorities informing the work of the historian and the archivist have been challenged.

Recently, the sense of partnership between historians and archivists in the study of the past has undergone a variety of stresses and strains. Historical scholarship is currently at a point where what constitutes the archive is a question fundamental to how we come to know the past and how that historical knowledge is shaped. History in its broadest sense is informed by a variety of authorities that include, but are not limited to, what is found in archival institutions. History and Archives now occupy very different spaces, a condition that has resulted from activities that are conceptual, technical, and practical. The convergence between History and Archival Science, also once considered axiomatic, born of shared intellectual concerns and methodologies, has become problematized. There has been a breakdown in common referents and shared understandings. This divergence is essentially what William Rosenberg and I have called the archival divide.

The convergence

Certainly in the United States, the intellectual space shared by Archival Science and History a century ago was defined collectively by those who studied the archive as a window to the past and by those whose work formed the archive in terms of content. This unified conceptual space was the result of a shared interest in the importance of institutions, a shared sense of promi-

⁴ Of particular importance regarding family papers is the work edited by Maria de Lurdes Rosa and Randolph C. Head: ROSA; HEAD (eds.), 2015.

ment actors, a shared view of seminal events, and a shared sense of national boundaries and definitions. Once assembled and developed, the content of the archive in many ways defined the boundaries of a historical scholarship that focused on state formation and national self-perception and definition. That is to say that the archives of government informed work in the history of the operations of governmental practices and actors. The interplay of these institutions of authorities, the monarchies, prime ministers, presidents, congress, governmental bureaucracy, the church, as well as the electorate at large, were the focus of historical research. At the heart of this work was a quest for understanding of, and devotion to, what constitutes the nation state.

Those historians who studied these state processes would then inform the formation of the archive itself. That is, the focus on state institutions and their structures formed the content of the archive and the structure of the arrangement and descriptive systems that described the content of the archive. Both historians and archivists were working within a framework of shared authorities, shared institutional focus, and shared purpose. The work of each informed the work of the other and the work of each was within the same boundary of what constituted historical knowledge. This marks a period of convergence in conceptions of what constitutes the archives and what constitutes the past⁵.

Institutional History relied on the existence of the records generated by the institutions themselves as evidence of particular processes and responsibilities. Since ancient times, the archive, constituted in one form or another, has been the location of these records. Refined in the early modern period with development of the principles of diplomatics, archives were increasingly regarded as the location of “authentic” records. The true and verifiable document. With the emergence of bureaucracies in the seventeenth century, the purpose of documentation was less to verify transactions and more to focus on the processes of decision-making. The truth of the contents of a particular document in a bureaucratic process could not always be verified, however

⁵ Classic texts on archives and on historical methodology assume this convergence. On archives see JENKINSON, 1922; SCHELLENBERG, 1965a. On historical methods see BARZUN; GRAFF, 1977; GOTTSCHALK, 1965.

the archivist could determine that a document was authentic to a particular bureaucratic process. For any particular document, its significance and veracity would depend on how it was read and contextualized.

The idea of authority embedded in the notion of an authentic record, however defined, privileged the archives as an authoritative source in understanding the past. Archives were a critical element in Rankean positivism and Collingwood's idea of History⁶. Authority in coming to an understanding of the past rested on an acceptance of the archive and a faith in the authenticity of its holdings. On occasion, that faith could be shaken by a false document, but the fundamental link between the purpose of the archive and the purpose of History stood firm⁷. This confidence was sustained because of a joint focus on the primacy of state-based institutional processes and government-based power in constituting the basis of a verifiable past.

In recent decades, this conceptual and methodological partnership began to diverge. On the one hand, History and those disciplines that increasingly embrace a historical perspective have broadened the range of what questions legitimately constitute a systematic examination of the past. The boundaries that defined the province of historical scholarship, once so tightly drawn around states and institutions, were expanding. The reach of new questions and the search for validation in forming a response to those questions pushed historians into new constructs of what constitutes a legitimate and an authoritative historical source. On the other hand, the work and purpose of archives also evolved in a variety of new directions, embracing new technologies, serving new constituencies, and facing the challenge of the exponential growth in the bulk of records produced.

The divergence in historical inquiry

On the History side of this divergence, historical inquiry as a field has evolved in many new directions. History proper, as a discipline, over recent

⁶ APPLEBY; HUNT; JACOB, 1994: 15-51.

⁷ GRAFTON, 1990.

decades has embraced an increasing variety of questions informed by theoretical perspectives on social behavior, social definition, social interaction, and the dynamics of power relationships. The central focus on institutions of government and the church has moved toward addressing complex questions derived from the nature of society as a whole. Issues of race, gender, sexuality, regionalism, class divides, postcolonial readjustments, subaltern identities, socio-economic policy and process, are just some of the pressing issues that increasingly dominate professional historical discourse. Consequently, historiography has expanded as a result of probing studies on all dimensions of the past. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has said, new understandings of these questions have diminished the central role of the west and its institutions in defining how we understand the past. It has led to what he calls the “provincialization of Europe”⁸. Terrence McDonald has shown other disciplines, including Literature, are increasingly turning to historical methodology to understand the place of texts and experience in time⁹. These are just two examples of the expanding boundaries of what constitutes History and the multiplicity of assumptions about what constitutes the past.

In probing these new questions, traditional archives have fallen short in their capacity to provide adequate sources. On many of these important historical questions, the traditional archive is silent. For example, the work of Lynn Hunt and others in cultural theory and in the varied dimensions of social History have pushed the boundaries of historical understanding to embrace new sources derived from the authority of memory and experience.¹⁰ In other cases, historians like Ann Stoler have proposed that archives be read against their “grain”¹¹. She argues that only by digging under the bureaucratic processes of colonial archives of the governors can we come to some understanding of the complex and diverse populations that were the governed.

What of the authority of memory in shaping historical understanding? What is the authority of one’s own identity formation in structuring the bound-

⁸ CHARKHARBARTY, 2007.

⁹ MCDONALD (ed.), 1996.

¹⁰ SCOTT, 1991; BERKHOFER JR., 1995.

¹¹ STOLER, 2009.

aries of inquiry? These kinds of questions challenge the central place of institutions in historical understanding and challenge the archive of those same institutions as an authority informing historical inquiries, and consequently challenge the authority of archives and documents themselves.

The divergence in archival administration

The purpose of archives generated by institutions is largely focused on documenting the inner dynamics of those same institutions. When historians using those records to study those same institutions, they and the archivists forming the record content of the archive used common referents. But as historical questions broadened to more complex readings of the documents to find underlying social and cultural processes, these commonalities began to diminish. Moreover, in pursuing these new questions, historians coming to the archives find descriptive systems, catalogues, and inventories that were derived and fixed from particular conceptual frameworks, in some cases decades if not centuries old. Moreover, technical considerations coupled with the exponentially increasing amount of records produced, especially those born digital, have forced new approaches to the administration of records in an archive. The result is this increasing divide between the work of historians and that of archivists — two worlds once considered the same.

As the range of historical questions was expanding well beyond a focus on institutions and prominent actors, the production of archival records in modern bureaucratic society mushroomed ushering in what F. Gerald Ham called the “post custodial era”¹². As academic users of archives were pursuing challenging new questions, archival institutions were facing challenges of their own. Archivists as never before were faced with a need to select. What to save? Saving for whom? What to throw away? There were three essential elements in the process of divergence in archives away from professional historical perspectives on the past: 1) the problem of the bulk of records, 2) the

¹² HAM, 1981.

challenge of finding resources for archival operations, and 3) the onslaught of new information technologies.

First, the problem of the bulk of records. It was really in the 1970s with ever expanding institutions, big government, big universities, etc., that archivists found the amount of material generated and slated to come to the archive far exceeded the space available. The National Archives of the United States, for example, reported retaining less than 2% of the records produced by government. How are such choices to be made? At an earlier time when History and the Archive together were concerned with institutions and principal actors, the work of one informed the other. By the 1970s with archives bulging, questions of retention arose. Who would guide the response? What historical categories would inform retention decisions? At the very time selection became an essential practical matter for the archive, the range of historical questions became increasingly wide. History was no longer monarchs and ministers, but, as noted above, moved to address a variety of social, demographic, psychological, cultural, sexual, questions. The result was essentially that no one story or historical question could be privileged over another, therefore every record was of potential value. If all stories were important then all documents were important. No one historian could take responsibility for recommending removal of material that might undermine the work of another. To do so would indeed privilege one story over another. There were no longer common referents that defined any notion of comparative importance.

The consequent limitation in any authoritative value derived from a particular historiographical perspective, coupled with difficulties in anticipating future historiographical trends, marginalized academic historical analysis in the evaluative constructs that were at the root of the "appraisal" or selection processes that formed the Archive. That is, historical analysis was marginalized in the decisions of what to save and what to throw away.

In archival methodology there was a conceptual turn that increasingly defines the archive today. The archive now is more inclined to emphasize the essential relationships embedded in records. That is the link between the record and the activity that generated the record. As Helen Samuels noted in her archival analysis of the records of the functions of higher education that ultimately constitute archives of higher education: " Little can be done [by the

archivist] ... to anticipate future research trends that alter the questions asked or the use of the documentation ... Rather than relying on subjective guesses about potential research, appraisal decisions must be guided by clearer documentary objectives based on a thorough understanding of the phenomenon or institution to be documented”¹³. The emphasis on the intrinsic functional nature of institutions or activities rests on an analysis of the nature of record-keeping that is rooted in historical notions of the archive as record combined with ideas of modern bureaucratic systems and constructs of organizational behavior and structure. These essentialist constructs that form the archive avoid the problem of historiographic relativity. History and Archival Science now no longer rely on, or are defined by, common authorities. While History has expanded its range of questions and concerns, and consequently its idea of what is an authoritative source, Archival Science as a discipline has of necessity retreated to a more narrow sense of the relationship between record and activity that is increasingly independent of historiographical sensitivities.

A second pressure on archives continues to be resources and the push to make archival institutions and collections useful to a broader set of constituencies. This brings into the mix local historians, genealogists, more public notions of the past. These groups and the consequent documentary requirements for their work have introduced new factors into the formation of archival holdings. This opens a whole discussion on administrative policies and priorities that is marginal to our discussion of the central concept of the archival divide. However, these practical issues relating to resources and public purpose must be addressed in the administration of the archival record. What is important here is that archives are now seen as public agencies that do not privilege the uses of scholars over other users.

A third very significant development in recent decades relates to new technologies. Born digital archives present new possibilities for the retention of huge amounts of records retrieved through the mediation of specific devices and systems. Access to these machine and/or cloud stored records depends entirely on access systems. There is no possibility to physically rummage through boxes. New and now not so new information technologies offer the

¹³ SAMUELS, 1992.

possibilities of rapid navigation through these accumulations of records based on descriptive categories preselected and proscribed by the archives itself as it reads its own holdings. Because these categories must be clear, based on structured language, and relatively timeless, there is a tendency in archives in the construction of these systems to avoid historiographical nuance and focus on the essential relationship between the activity and the records produced by that activity.

Also, at a time when archival description is focused on controlled vocabularies and fixed linguistic structures or algorithms, many historians have come to find language itself a culturally based and politically charged instrument. For some historians the role and value of language are themselves evidence of highly contextualized relationships. As Gabrielle Spiegel has proposed, one of the features of the linguistic turn in historical study has been to “undermine our faith in the instrumental capacity of language to convey information about the world”¹⁴. This development occurs at the same time that archivists work to establish fixed and timeless linguistic categories that provide essential content on line access systems.

Conclusion

To visit the archive now is to engage an institution with its own well-developed set of intellectual, cultural, political, and/or technical constructs largely removed from the conceptions and language of academic historical discourse. The distance that has emerged between the historian and archivist is thus much more than a separation of professional interaction and activity. It is instead symptomatic of a much deeper divide: between divergent conceptual frameworks for understanding and using contemporary and historical documentation; between the evolving conceptual frameworks for historical understanding and those related to the efficient and practical retention of records; between the ways archivists and historians now and in the future will process the past.

¹⁴ SPIEGEL, 1997: 264.

This is the essence of the archival divide. The gap between what the descriptive systems tell us is in the archive and what we hope to find there, has created a more complex view by historians of archives as institutions. If society and its internal interactions are indeed culturally based, then is not the archive, too, a product of that same cultural dynamic? What is in the archive? How did it get there? By what political/cultural and or temporal analytic framework were the records assembled and presented? What, then, is the authority of the records in validating a historical understanding? What is not there? What, then, is the authority of the absence in affirming broad cultural realities? Are there alternative sources known through personal identity and experience? In the face of these questions then, the archive moves from being a place of study to becoming the object of study.

In reacting to our work on the archival divide, one reviewer asked: archivists and historians, can they be friends¹⁵? Of course the answer is yes. But the comment I think misses the main point of what we are saying. The divergence represented in the archival divide is not personal, it is not even professional. Rather, it is conceptual. It represents two diverging conceptualizations of how we approach the past. The questions pushing how we understand the past, the cultural issues, social issues, political issues are expanding the boundaries of how we define historical understanding. History is now a vast field where nearly every dimension of life on this planet has legitimacy as an academic question. Archives is also a vast field that deals with the explosion of information resources, the necessity of selection, the impact and the limits or possibilities of technology. This has led to two increasingly separate circles of discourse, two increasingly separate intellectual spheres. It is not a matter that the professions do not intersect, nor that we are friends; rather, it is a matter of two separate conceptual frameworks — the historical and the archival. These are increasingly diverging.

¹⁵ RITCHIE, 2012.