

# Practicing Archives with a Postmodern Perspective<sup>1</sup>

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Despite the near ubiquity of so-called postmodern discourse in the social sciences and humanities over the past two decades, the archival profession has in general been loath to reconsider its self-image as objective guardian of a naturally occurring historical record. The "myth of objectivity and neutrality," as Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook have termed it, stems from pioneer archives theorist Sir Hilary Jenkinson, whose 1922 textbook asserted that archivists are the passive, impartial "keepers" of "disinterested" or "innocent" documentary residue inherited from the past.<sup>2</sup>

As this seminar has demonstrated, a growing number of archivists question this view and have called for the profession to reconsider this naïve, unexamined faith in its own objectivity. Archival practices and principles are not transparent, they suggest. Archivists are participants in the production of knowledge, co-creators of the historical record. Non-archivists, too, have argued provocatively and persuasively on the nature of archives and the role of archivists. Patrick Geary, for example, has written that archives are the "'relics' by which the past continue[s] to live into the present.

How these tangible or written relics of the past were preserved, who preserved them, and who could therefore make them to disappear [are] thus fundamental aspects of power and authority. The creation of the past, then, whether individual or collective, seem[s] far from a natural and spontaneous development . . .<sup>3</sup>

And in creating the past, "annalists, chroniclers, and historians alike consciously select from a spectrum of possible *memorabilia* those which are *memoranda* - that is, those worth remembering."<sup>4</sup>

The view of archivists as intermediaries in the production of knowledge is not news, then, to the participants in this seminar. Indeed, we archivists seem to stand at the intersection of two mediation processes. Archivists engage in a dialogue with materials, transforming them into archives and creating a potential for knowledge. Researchers, engaging in their own dialogue with the materials, realize that potential in their publications. With the archivist and the researcher come two sets of practices, then, two sets of interactions, two cultures influencing one another, both resulting in the production of knowledge. Geary's "relics" and "possible memorabilia" are archives, and archives are not boxes of records, they are layers upon layers of human decisions, conscious and unconscious, each reinforcing the last to comprise the whole.

How does this unfold in practice? On a typical day, archivists craft responses to an unrelenting stream of highly subjective questions. Which materials are of enduring value, and of value to whom? If we collect this, what do we not collect? What are our criteria for these distinctions, and how do we justify our choices? Which materials should be selected for digitization, and does that privilege individual records at the expense of the collection? How do we describe these materials without biasing the perceptions of future researchers? What criteria do we use when allocating resources to collection development, to processing and preservation, to digitization projects, to providing onsite access to our collections? These are serious questions with very real consequences; thoughtful archivists struggle with them every day and do their best to craft workable solutions. In busy archives, these questions come fast and furious, and they are exceedingly repetitive and tedious. It simply isn't feasible to stop and consider the implications of every decision. To do so would be to invite paralysis, to pick at a loose thread knowing full well that this will cause the whole garment to unravel before our eyes.

To combat this potentially crippling uncertainty, archivists rely on a staunch body of professional knowledge and tradition which helps to propel them forward and allow them to function. We focus upon acting, doing things, rather than reflecting upon our practice. The truth, like manifest

destiny, is readily apparent; archivists just need to act on it, making choices, identifying what is important, but not necessarily revealing the reasons for these decisions or evaluating them in retrospect. Archives, as we know them, depend, to a degree, on our steadfast avoidance of any kind of serious self-reflection.

And yet for some among us, archives is a field of unquestionably legitimate intellectual inquiry, its study worthy of analysis as any other discipline. Proponents of this view would move the field into the arena of critical theory and plant archival tradition and knowledge tradition within a larger philosophical, ideological, and theoretical framework. Yet archival theorists and those who encourage intellectual professional self-reflection have not, as of yet, been able to make a convincing enough case to the profession at large to force the issue.

There are several reasons for this. Stimulating and important as the larger theoretical and ideological issues are, archives, ultimately, is a practitioner's field, a service industry, and not an end in itself. Practice is how we archivists justify our existence. We do what we do so that others – historians, administrators, students, government officials, genealogists -- can do what they do. These “user groups,” as we call them, support archives, not archival thinking or archival theory. We have no choice but to continue to practice our craft, regardless of shifts in the intellectual climate. For that reason, perhaps, the vast majority of archivists approach the field with a 19<sup>th</sup> century-style positivism that they are reluctant to shake. The reality is that practicing archivists often feel (quite rightly) that they are too busy “running the shop” -- responding to the needs of researchers, administrators, and staff, developing and managing the collections, mastering new technologies, seeking much-needed funding -- to keep up with and respond to the products of what seems to be purely academic inquiry.

This is certainly the case when it comes to formal archival theory, which is soundly ignored or actively rejected by the majority of archivists. “I don't have time for theory!” is a cry heard not infrequently at archives conferences. The same holds true for larger trends and directions in

academic discourse that are not specifically archival. An element of archival class-consciousness may be at work here; the profession is more diverse than it may appear to non-archivists, and the differing orientations of, for example, archival educators, manuscript curators, and government, academic, and corporate archivists can lead to sharply drawn and deeply felt divisions.

In the view of many archivists, then, theory is at best, irrelevant. Less often articulated but, I believe, equally widespread, is a vague suspicion among the majority of archivists that theory undermines practice. Perhaps this is justifiable. Postmodernism (writ large) which is the particular concern of this essay, could well function as a great wrecking ball when applied in a literal fashion to the primitive positivism of archival practice, knocking down archival values and expertise and demolishing our assumptions about ourselves and our profession. Postmodernism presents practicing archivists with a set of dilemmas. Archival tradition, shot through as it is with the Jenkinsonian myth, does not stand up readily to this kind of challenge. As Peter Novick wrote of the historical tradition, “at the very center of the professional historical venture is the idea and ideal of ‘objectivity.’ [Objectivity] was the rock on which the venture was constituted, its continuing *raison d’être*.”<sup>5</sup> And so it is with the archival profession. The illusion of objectivity, fed by archival convention, allows us to continue our work with the degree of certainty necessary to carry on.

It does not help that both the determined theorists and the staunch practitioners have good cases to make. Theirs are familiar and wearying arguments in archival circles. To ignore the theorists would be to consign ourselves to willful ignorance and blind adherence to tradition. To grapple seriously with their discourse could be to invite professional paralysis. Clearly neither alternative adds much to the profession. There seems little hope of reconciliation between the two viewpoints without some sort of massive effort – which has yet even to be identified. If the profession accepts, as it has to, that there is really no perfect response to the challenges of postmodernism, then the next step is to move away from the argument and develop practicable, if imperfect, ways to get on with it.

Fortunately, the archival profession is hardly the first to find itself in this predicament, and, in this respect, it is a blessing that the field was so late to professionalize; we archivists can reap the benefits of lessons learned in fields that did so earlier. Recognizing that we will not find perfection, we can look to our colleagues in disciplines that have undergone similar challenges to their theoretical underpinnings and have crafted reasonably workable solutions.

History, of course, faced its own wrecking ball with the challenge to professional objectivity that occurred in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the aftermath of World War I, the profession confronted, as Novick puts it, a

fundamental and sweeping challenge to [its] posture of disinterested objectivity. . . [The] war itself became the subject of interminable historical controversy, undermining faith that professional historical scholarship would converge on a consensual objective truth. Whereas before the war, American historians were largely isolated from modernist currents in philosophical, scientific, and social thought, after it, these currents became a significant factor in the rethinking of historiographical issues.<sup>6</sup>

The practice of history, however, differs fundamentally from the practice of archives. While archivists may turn naturally to history for precedent, other disciplines, such as anthropology, may prove more useful with respect to the concerns raised in this paper. One particularly important factor distinguishes the practice of history from that of archives and anthropology too: while historians can revisit and reinterpret the record, archivists and anthropologists engaged in fieldwork must make their decisions before the moment passes. While many disciplines blend practice, theory, and methodology and provide models from which archivists might borrow, for several reasons, I believe that anthropology – its fieldwork component in particular -- provides a good starting point.

Anthropological fieldwork, like archives, is practice mediated by subjectivity. Like archivists, anthropologists are collectors; they gather material for the purpose of future analysis or evaluation, material that provides the body of evidence from which any number of conclusions can be drawn. If archivists engage in a dialogue with materials that produces archival collections, anthropologists might be said to engage in a parallel dialogue that produces data and field notes.

Archival collections and field notes create a potential for knowledge. For archivists, that potential is realized when a researcher engages in his or her own dialogue with the materials. For anthropologists, the potential is realized in a second dialogue that takes the form of ethnography and subsequent analytical works.

Like archivists, anthropologists viewed themselves initially as *neutral* gatherers of data. And anthropology, like history, faced its own crisis when that neutrality was challenged, in anthropology's case by the concept of cultural relativism. Cultural relativism, a concept which arose within anthropology itself, encompasses ideas on which themes of social memory, relationships between archives and power, historical representation, and identity politics turn. Anthropologists have struggled with these concepts for generations. Fortunately for archivists, the documentation of that struggle is abundant and readily available.

In the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, anthropology grappled with its professional identity, took on distinct national conventions, began to break into sub-specialties, and struggled to find its place in the sciences. Concurrently, a new emphasis on methodology, standards of practice, and standards by which to evaluate research emerged. The importance of revealing one's methods was the corollary realization. In 1922, Malinowski was the first to argue that a statement of field procedure must be included in a report of fieldwork results. "No-one would dream," he wrote,

of making an experimental contribution to physical or chemical science, without giving a detailed account of all the arrangements of the experiments; an exact description of the apparatus used; of the manner in which the observations were conducted; of their number; of the length of time devoted to them . . . In less exact sciences . . . this cannot be done as rigorously, but every student will do his best to bring home to the reader all the conditions in which the experiment or the observations were made . . . In ethnography, where a candid account of such data is perhaps even more necessary, it has unfortunately in the past not always been supplied with sufficient generosity, and many writers do not ply the full searchlight of methodic sincerity, as they move among their facts and produce them before us out of complete obscurity.<sup>7</sup>

Along with his argument for stating methods, Malinowski articulated for the first time the doctrine of the participant observer, an approach that recognized the anthropologist's presence in the community. The participant observer, by definition, had a distinct perspective, one that had to be

acknowledged and stated. With the construction of the participant observer concept came the first recognition of and attempt to overcome the problem of subjectivity, the ultimate goal being to collect more data, better and more accurate data. The role of the participant observer, then, broke sharply with the approach taken by the missionaries from whom much early data came, and broke just as sharply with contemporary anthropologists who observed their subjects from afar.

The doctrine was to arouse considerable and contentious discussion. As the discourse developed, deficiencies in the concept of anthropologist as participant observer began to emerge. The concept was troubling, as Melville Herskovits pointed out in 1948. While it represented progress in the struggle with subjectivity, it did not overcome the principle of cultural relativism, according to which, Herskovits wrote,

judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation. In adducing this principle, we touch on many fundamental questions that philosophers have long raised. The problem of value is one such question . . . We even approach the problem of the ultimate nature of reality itself. . . [If] reality can only be experienced through the symbolism of language . . . [I]s reality, then, not defined and redefined by the ever-varied symbolisms of the innumerable languages of mankind?"<sup>8</sup>

Cultural relativism cut right into anthropological assumptions about observable truth on which the discipline depended. The anthropologist as neutral collector of data was toppled, as was the possibility of absolute confidence in the conclusions drawn from that data.

If an ethnography was not a neutral compilation of value-free evidence, the anthropologist had to declare his or her perspective and methodology. These could no longer be considered self-evident. Anthropologists responded to the crisis in their field with a broadening acceptance of this approach. Just as Malinowski had called for anthropologists to supply explanatory and contextual information using "the full searchlight of methodic sincerity," Herskovits determined that "honesty of purpose"<sup>9</sup> was a critical point on which successful ethnography would turn. If anthropologists could not be completely objective, they could be evaluated and held accountable for their decisions and conclusions; their explicit discussion of methods and viewpoint would

make them so. Gradually, then, the specific and detailed articulation of methodology and personal and professional perspective was built into the practice of anthropology.

This was no easy proposition. Accepting the doctrine of cultural relativism meant admitting the inability to eradicate bias from one's work. Troubling as that was, anthropologists continued to work and to work in increasingly sophisticated modes, especially in their handling and analysis of theory and its intersection with practice. This would unfold in an array of forms. Here is one example.

In the early 1930s, two anthropologists, Sol Tax and Ruth Bunzel, went separately to the small Guatemalan village of Chichicastenango to collect data -- observable information about the village and its people -- for independent ethnographies. Both studies were intended as objective compilations and analyses of data collected on the village and its inhabitants and both adhered strictly to established professional practice.<sup>10</sup> The resulting publications, however, were startlingly different in their focus and in their estimation of what was important in the village culture. Tax's work, eventually published in 1953, suggested that economic factors drove village life in Chichicastenango. Bunzel's work, published around the same time, concluded that life in Chichicastenango centered on ritual and belief.

Both books convey tension and, sometimes, contradiction between the authors' striving for complete objectivity and recognition that this is unattainable. "There is no economic theory in this book," wrote Tax, "I am simply describing the way a people live." Yet his presence is explicit throughout the book.<sup>11</sup> He slips frequently from the third to the first person and comments on inadequacies in his own method and uncertainty about his decisions. Bunzel is similarly conflicted. She cites the similar conclusions of her work and that of another colleague as "a demonstration of the objectivity of anthropological fieldwork." At the same time, she acknowledges, "there is no magic formula, but there are many paths to partial truths . . ." <sup>12</sup> Bunzel and Tax realized that they and their colleagues were exploring new methodological



terrain. As Tax wrote in the 1951 preface to the book, “What I offer is a conception of how one studies a primitive money economy. My own work falls short of an ideal because I had no model. Here is a pattern from which others may depart.”<sup>13</sup>

What conclusions can we draw from these two examples? Several possibilities spring to mind. Despite their self-doubt and fundamentally different conclusions, Tax and Bunzel both produced classic ethnographies whose conclusions can be understood and evaluated more than half a century later. They have held up, in part, because the authors took painstaking efforts to reveal their inclinations and their decisions in lengthy, detailed, cogent descriptions of their training, their techniques and methods. Both authors strove to identify and articulate their own biases. Neither claimed to present the authoritative version of life in Chichicastenango. Struggle as they did with the problem of subjectivity, both authors’ care to declare their perspectives and methods made them accountable to the profession, and made it possible for future anthropologists to evaluate and understand their decisions. These works, and many others, provided a set of models for subsequent ethnographies, which built upon the foundation they laid and expanded their boundaries. In other words, through repeated application, the struggles with theory and methodology illuminated and improved practice throughout the discipline and moved it forward.

Theory and practice, in anthropology as in archives, has a chicken and egg quality, a quality that archivists have yet to explore fully. Theory reifies practice, which, once reified, can then act upon its progenitor. For archives, it makes sense to emphasize the primacy of practice, both as epistemology and goal, because, in our profession, theory is meaningless if not translated into practice or, at least, into practical terms. We might, in fact, construe theory and practice *not* as distinct entities, but as inextricably linked. As a colleague remarked recently, archival theory is what is actually happening in our minds as we are making routine decisions in the archives – not something we sit down and contemplate when we leave the archives. The contextual knowledge abstracted from previous practice that allows us to make decisions is constantly playing in our minds as we work. It’s just that we have not been willing to reveal it.

As previously noted, the crisis in anthropology emanated from within the discipline, from the introspection of anthropologists themselves. The stories of Malinowski, Herskovits, Bunzel, and Tax demonstrate that the very same practitioners whose intellectual acuity created dilemmas of theory and philosophy for themselves then took it upon themselves to craft solutions, in the form of new methodologies that, while imperfect, allowed them continue to practice with their integrity intact. Archivists, having raised the kinds of questions that motivated and have now characterized this seminar, need to do the same.

The archival literature evidences increasing and increasingly thoughtful responses to challenges to the intellectual underpinnings of the profession. But, with a few notable exceptions, archivists have not yet demonstrated convincingly that a thorough reexamination of professional principles in the light of current theory has the potential to illuminate or improve practice. We now need to enlarge the scope of our exploration to include mechanisms for shifting from theory to practice.

To return to an earlier point, most archivists hesitate to recognize their role as intermediaries in the production of knowledge. We are trained to avoid editorializing in our finding aids. We follow professional standards that, while subjective in themselves, seem to reduce our individual subjectivity. If we look around, however, we are surrounded by examples of our own blatant participation in the creation of the historical record. Ironically, in some of these examples, our roles are as bland and uncontroversial as they are active. We are comfortable, it seems, playing active roles, but not recognizing them as such. We practice what we don't preach.

As Helen Samuels points out, archivists promote records management techniques in an attempt to control aspects of the creation and retention of records. We accept the premise that archival participation is necessary at the creation of electronic records if we are to rely on them in the future. And archivists have recognized that "certain phenomena will not be documented without active intervention," and taken steps to address this situation – as, Samuels notes, the "archival record of a dance company requires the creation of a moving image record of the dances."<sup>14</sup> If

the number of grants awarded and conference papers presented in recent years indicate a shift in our thinking, then it certainly seems that other kinds of very deliberate documentary projects are becoming quite acceptable to the profession, commonplace, in fact. A rash of archival initiatives in recent years have been aimed at “documenting the underdocumented” -- meaning anything from science and technology, to farm life, to the experience of social and ethnic groups. Oral history programs are now widely accepted components of archival programs.

All of these archival activities and initiatives require the archivist to act as creator of the historical record. They vary greatly, though, with respect to the level of accountability to which the archivist is held. Effective records management requires archivists to codify their policies and decisions. Oral histories are all over the map -- sometimes accompanied by important contextual information and governed by the stringent guidelines provided by the Oral History Association, sometimes presented as the self evident historical truth.<sup>15</sup> Documentary projects vary greatly as well; there is no professional consensus or set of standards that requires archivists to reveal their methods or explain their assumptions. We do not routinely hold ourselves accountable for our decisions.

There are, fortunately, some excellent exceptions, and these can provide the “patterns from which we may depart,” as Sol Tax put it. In 1995, Helen Samuels undertook a documentary project at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to address perceived deficiencies in the “traditional” documentation of teaching and learning. Arguing in her 1992 book *Varsity Letters: Documenting Modern Colleges and Universities* that the university archivist’s role was to document seven core functions of the institutions, Samuels had concluded in her research that one of those key functions, teaching and learning, is relatively difficult to document and poorly documented by traditional, passive methods, i.e., hoping that such materials as schedules and course handouts will find their way to the archives.<sup>16</sup> Unsatisfied with this situation, Samuels proposed that the archives might try selectively targeting courses for fuller documentation.

Working with a team of faculty, staff, and students in a mechanical engineering design course, Samuels set out to explore this possibility.<sup>17</sup>

The write up of the project, titled “Drinking from the Fire hose: Documenting Education at MIT” was published in the Australian journal *Archives and Manuscripts*. It reads remarkably like one of the ethnographies described earlier. This was not an accident. Indeed, Samuels writes, “as good archivists, we tried to be very self-conscious and careful about keeping accurate records . . . and revealing our role in the documentary process.”<sup>18</sup>

Like the participant observer, the author reveals her stance on the subject of the archivist as documenter. She details the uncertainty associated with such a project. “Is it possible to deliberately create a documentary record of a class activity?” she asks at the outset. “What then did we want to know about this course?” “What were we trying to document?” From whose point of view would the class be documented? A series of documentary goals are identified, and a methodology for pursuing them described in detail.<sup>19</sup>

The project can be evaluated in much the same way as the works of Sol Tax and Ruth Bunzel. Like those ethnographies, “Drinking from the Firehose” includes a lengthy and cogent introduction revealing the techniques and methods used. Like Bunzel and Tax, Samuels struggles to declare the particular interest - that is, bias - that she has brought to the project. Samuels does not present the documentation created and gathered during the project as the authoritative or authentic version of teaching and learning. Her description of the project leaves her fully accountable.

This is, of course, an example of fairly extreme archival intervention. My point, however, is that while all archival activity, even the decision not to act, is just that – active – archivists perform it according to unstated professional assumptions and individual biases. This raises a number of questions. Why are we so selective about which archival endeavors seem to warrant the

articulation of goals and methods? There is an unprofessional and unnecessary haphazardness to these decisions. If we cannot be entirely objective, our work can be evaluated and we can be held accountable, if we begin by thinking through these issues and honestly declaring our points of view and methodologies.

Uncertainty about our work individually and about the field's direction is guaranteed to play a role in our efforts. This is to be expected. Every other serious intellectual field or discipline grapples with this uncertainty. It is only a measure of our own professional immaturity if we decide that archives is somehow exempt. Failure to reveal our methods and perspectives keeps archivists from developing a more formal intellectual apparatus for the discipline, which in turn prevents us from refining and improving our practice. It limits our ability to communicate our ideas to, or our differences with, professionals in other disciplines. If we want to enter into conversations with other professionals and academics, we have to wrestle with our expectations and our perceptions. Archival work is not self evident; we have to make our methods intelligible to ourselves and to others. The result would not be, I think, some postmodern flirtation, but an increasingly mature discipline, and, most important, an evolving set of practices, the articulation of individual decisions in the day to day routine, that can be understood and evaluated over time. The key, or keyhole rather, is in the postmodern emphasis on perspective.

It is only fitting to end this essay on a practical note. Where to now, for archivists? The example of the MIT project provides us with a glimpse of the possibilities for handling these issues when we undertake deliberate documentary projects. But we need to reveal our methods and our perspectives on all levels of the archival endeavor. How would that play out for our most basic archival functions? How would we alter our collecting policies, our appraisal guidelines, our discussions with donors? What kinds of additional information do our finding aids need to include? What information about a collection and its history should be captured so that a reference archivist can communicate it to researchers? Systematic explorations of these issues are much needed; I hope to take part in that exploration in a future study.

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<sup>1</sup> Postmodernism - actually a diverse set of concepts and theories - is used here in its most broadly construed sense to describe the body of thinking that breaks with positivist notions of truth and reality as objective and unified in favor of an increased concern with subjectivity, experience, and multiple perspectives.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook, eds., *Archival Truth and Historical Consequences: The Construction of Social Memory*, forthcoming, draft introduction, April 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick J. Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 7.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 1.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, 111-112.

<sup>7</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1932), 2-3.

<sup>8</sup> Melville J. Herskovits, *Man and His Works: The Science of Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 64.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, 93.

<sup>10</sup> Sol Tax, *Penny Capitalism: A Guatemalan Indian Economy* (Washington D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1953); Ruth Bunzel, *Chichicastenango: A Guatemalan Village* (Gluckstadt, Germany: J.J. Augustin, 1952).

<sup>11</sup> Tax, ix.

<sup>12</sup> Bunzel, xiii-xiv.

<sup>13</sup> Tax, x.

<sup>14</sup> Helen W. Samuels, *Varsity Letters: Documenting Modern Colleges and Universities* (Metuchen N.J. and London: Scarecrow Inc., 1992), 13.

<sup>15</sup> The Oral History Association has done a remarkable job in developing and promoting professional standards for its highly subjective craft. The recently updated "Evaluation Guidelines" on the OHA web site at <http://omega.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha/> may provide some useful points for archivists.

<sup>16</sup> Samuels, *Varsity Letters*, see especially Chapter 2, "Convey Knowledge."

<sup>17</sup> Helen W. Samuels "Drinking from the Fire Hose: Documenting Education at MIT," *Archives and Manuscripts: the Journal of the Archives Section, the Library Association of Australia* 25:1 (May 1997): 36-49.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, 44.

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, 38.