

# Administration and the "Three Ages" of Archives

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IT IS obvious that archival sciences and administrative services work with the same records: Administration creates them and cares for them during their early years; Archives collects them at a later date and, if they warrant it, assures their permanent retention. Except for the rare occasions of transfers or disposal actions, however, the bureaus and Archives in France ignore one another. This "ignorance" occasions serious losses, of which Administration and Historical Research are the victims. To remedy these ills and to provide a beneficial collaboration, archivists and administrators must agree on what are and what ought to be public records from their creation to their final disposition (either as permanent records or disposable papers). At first glance these matters seem simple enough, but a more intensive study of them reveals their more complicated nature. I wish to discuss these questions briefly, using as a connecting theme the three successive stages that everyone recognizes as the "destiny" of administrative documents: current records, archival records, and the intermediate stage. A superficial view shows these three stages easily, but a critical analysis demonstrates that superficial observations do not merit serious consideration. To understand the facts thoroughly, some analogical approaches are needed, after which we can try to formulate a valid theory and draw conclusions.

This paper appeared in its original version under the title "L'Administration et les 'trois âges' des archives" in the review *Seine et Paris*, no. 20 (Oct. 1961). The present translation was made expressly for publication in the *American Archivist*, with the consent of the author and of the editor of *Seine et Paris*, by Hope K. Holdcamper of the staff of the National Archives. M. Pérotin is Directeur des Services d'Archives de la Seine et de la Ville de Paris. Following a visit to the United States in 1962 he published a study of records management and American archives. Recently, as an official delegate of France to the Extraordinary Congress of the International Council on Archives, held in Washington, D.C., May 9-13, 1966, he renewed his association with many members of the Society of American Archivists. To Ernst Posner, a member of the editorial board, the editor of the *American Archivist* is indebted for recognizing that the exceptional merit of M. Pérotin's paper justifies setting aside a general policy of avoiding the publication of papers that have been published elsewhere, even when translated.

## A NAIVE VIEW OF THINGS

The less informed observer recognizes two ages in the "life" of public records. The first is that of administrative documents: the bureaus preserve for their use their recent records (registers and well developed case files or dossiers—useful, practical, but at the same time banal and prosaic). After that, the age of historic documents: the Archives preserve in their records depositories old papers, more or less like parchment, covered with that fine layer of dust that settles on the best wines. Perfectly classified, numbered, and inventoried according to methods taught at the *École des Chartes*, these documents serve the genealogists and editors of journals of popular history. (If the observer is a little better informed, he will admit not only that these "historical records" have an anecdotal interest but that they can serve certain scholars also as a source for economic, demographic, and sociological studies.)

At this point of the analysis, current records and archival records seem perfectly heterogeneous, which renders unthinkable the passage from one stage to another, a passage which nevertheless must have been made. The little-informed observer is not troubled by this mystery because he does not see the problem. If, however, you ply him cleverly with questions, he will eventually discover that an intermediate stage exists between the apparent order of the dossiers of the bureaus and the apparent order of the archival containers. He will quickly recognize that, if the papers conserved in the archives did not proceed directly from the portfolios of the administrators, they must have come from those accumulations that are found in the corridors of offices and in the closets of bureaus, or they may have been hidden in hovels or storage places that are firetraps or even in lofts and cellars that rain and water from rivers and sewers do not always spare. Thus an intermediate age is revealed, the awkward age, that of piles [of papers]—the troublesome transition between Administration and History.

If, however, you now ask the observer how from this base lead pure gold is made, how this unformed mass becomes the noble substance, the delight of "scholars," hope no further. The Socratic method has its limits. The observer will answer you by an appeal to the supernatural: The archivist—I was going to write alchemist—works mysterious changes. That explanation is weak, but more dangerous is [the fact] that often the archivist, thus promoted to "miracle worker," laughs in his beard, completely happy to find

compensation for the scornful humor that characterizes his employment as that of rag-picker.

Now if, in the final observations I have just recapitulated, there is recognition that three fundamental ages of archives do exist, it matters not. The analysis is completely false. Because there is no true order at the beginning, no true order at the end, and no miracle between the two, there are only the deplorable conditions for which Administration and Archives are more or less responsible.

#### WHAT REALLY TAKES PLACE

Let us look more closely. To begin with, and speaking generally, the bureaus do not have as good current records as one would believe. The most important dossiers—those that concern administrative activities of the greatest importance (adoption of policies, discussions, exchanges of letters and notes about a policy, reports of results, syntheses, criticisms, etc.)—these are the worst organized and worst classified records. "Created" haphazardly and often with several examples on the same theme, stuffed with useless papers and duplicates, and segregated from the main body of records (because they are more or less confidential), these files are arranged without any order. That is to say, they become rapidly unusable. And at the lower echelons of administration, while the registers and routine procedural files are generally well kept, the dossiers on diverse activities are no better treated than at the higher level.

As they are overfilled and unserviceable, all these useless dossiers annoy the administrators, who see them occupying precious space in the cramped quarters where the administrators already have had difficulty in accommodating personnel, furnishings, and typewriters. Thus, in spite of the *reticence* [reluctance] of the persons charged with the management of the files (more or less aware that important documents lie at the heart of the shapeless bundles), the passage to the second stage, that of the "piles," is prescribed too soon: at first to the corridors, soon to a corner, and thence to the attics or cellars. During this phase such shifts occur again and again in those bureaus that are quickly overcrowded and too soon cleared out in order to make room for new business. Too often, time and money are spent to search for information for studies already made, for the very same data contained in the dossiers removed to storage.

But soon, as successive transfers have been made, there comes a time when the storage spaces are full. What then? The answer: destroy or send to Archives. At this point, it is interesting to note,

the alternatives are equivalents in the eyes of Administration, which sees only papers for which it no longer has use. If a distinction is made, however, it is generally on the intervention of the archivists, who either authorize the destruction or welcome the transfer. In so acting, archivists are doing their job. Do they undertake it seriously? They might, if they had the power. Indeed, outside of routine documents of which I have spoken and concerning which everyone knows well enough what ought to be saved and what ought to be destroyed, the task is not easy. One must have wide experience to know how to evaluate dossiers that are less well defined, not uniform, and often badly in need of repair. In such uncertainty, nearly fatal, the professional archivist hesitates to suppress all scruples and to authorize improper destruction (or to call quietly for repeated "indefinite postponement"); also the archivist, when he has any available space, resigns himself most often to the accumulation of trash in order to save the pearls. Poor pearls! What selections, what classifications can ever dislodge them? One does what one can; that is to say, very little. One will treat carefully a small lot that one will select with care, from which one will extract a very small group of records about half useless; and the rest will clutter up the archives. This is what really takes place. Although some notable exceptions may exist, I do not believe that in general the picture can be painted too black. We must get out of this situation.

#### APPROACHES TO A SOUND POLICY

To form a sound policy on how archives ought to be dealt with during the three stages of their existence, if one wants Administration and later Historical Research to be usefully documented, it is preferable perhaps to proceed from preliminary approaches that will permit a deeper understanding of the facts and their relations. Let us use for this purpose certain disciplines that obviously do not have archives for their goal but that will furnish by analogy some useful views.

In the classic manner, in this frame of reference, one appeals to psychology because in one sense archives are a memory. To develop this theme: let us consider all these things first from the point of view of Administration. The papers of a bureau constitute its memory. While they are on the desk of their creator one can compare them to the memory that remains in the realm of psychological consciousness. As soon as these papers are placed in their filing cabinets, conforming thus to the first age of archives,

one considers them as having moved on into the subconscious, whence they can be easily recalled. The following stage, that of the piles and corridors [is comparable to] the realm of the unconscious, from which only a skillful and patient psychoanalyst knows how to extract them. Their destruction, of course, is irreversible oblivion. From this perspective the wise "bureaucrat" uses this memory as certain superior minds use theirs: he gradually forgets all that has transitory value and preserves all that merits it in the zone of more or less immediate consciousness. If one wishes to extend this transposition to the archival stage, one would say that there exists among the data of the "administrative memory" elements of particular value, durable and in some way transcendent, which are lastingly integrated in a vast collective memory, that of History, which the archivists conserve and the researchers exploit.

The first approach having permitted us to show the use, or better the uses, of archives in their various stages, we can better prepare a definition of the techniques to be used if we set aside the role of psychologist and assume that of economist and speak in terms of production. Surely when the economists of today, breaking with ancient doctrine, consider administrators as producers, they mean producers of services. But one must point out that they also produce records. Isn't the point in question the byproduct? Yes and no. During the stages where they are used by the agencies the records ought rather to be considered as the fruit of a production of a stock of tools by the enterprise. This stock of tools, which becomes an integral part of the administrative capital and is of use in the production of services, is not used up (or very little); on the contrary, it generally suffers from progressive obsolescence. This last phenomenon inescapably brings about (although at various dates) the scrapping of tools of this very special kind if some of them do not find users outside the administrative enterprise. The records reserved for permanent retention in the archives, then, can well be held to be a byproduct of Administration, a byproduct that Historical Research uses. The users of the records being different, the uses are not the same and to such a degree that the successive uses can be measured—nothing forbidding it theoretically—to show the variations of usefulness or lack of it by time function for the same archival document. The superimposition on the same graph of the generally descending curve of primary use (administrative), of the generally ascending curve of secondary use (historical), and of the breaks in time that represent various regulations—availability to the public and so forth—can help to determine the dates of

disposals, the duration of the second age of documents, and other things as well.

It is possible to make other analogical approaches—for example to consider archives as organisms or as living matter, and to play biologist or demographer. It is not necessary, however, to do so.

### WHAT SHOULD BE DONE

Following these appeals to unrelated disciplines, useful appeals but a little farfetched, let us look at the matter directly and try to describe the various ages of archives and to suggest how records should be managed for the greatest benefit of Administration and History. Let us do so by means of an ideal diagram accompanied by some commentary. In this outline, the disposal actions that should reduce the records are presented alternately between the stages of the conservation of archives.

#### Reception or Creation of Papers

##### First Disposal

Made by the users

Comprising [contents of] wastepaper baskets

##### First Age: Current Records

Duration: 1 to 4 years

Place: Administrative workplace

User: Administration

Responsibility: Administration

##### Second Disposal

Made by the users under control of Archival Services

Comprising papers of no further administrative use and without historical value

##### Second Age: Archives for Deposit

Duration: 20 to 100 years

Place: intermediate depositories

User: Administration

Responsibility: Administration under control of Archival Services

##### Third Disposal

Made by Archival Services, sometime during the course of the second age

Comprising the same categories as the preceding

##### Third Age: Archival Archives

Duration: Unlimited

Place: Archives

User: Historical Research and occasionally Administration

Responsibility: Archival Services

The *first age* does not present great theoretical problems. The only requirement is that the bureaus keep good records and pro-

duce dossiers that are not filled with useless papers. These dossiers and the rest of the current records should be maintained in good order. To accomplish this the interested officials must understand the problems of archives; all should receive a minimum amount of instruction, and certain ones should have definite responsibility for the records. At this stage, Archival Services intervenes only as a consultant.

The *second age*, one must say, is definitely more difficult. We have seen that Administration at this stage often has the tendency not to recognize its offspring. It expels them prematurely from the home or houses them in garrets under deplorable conditions. Archival Services, on their part, hesitate at this stage to accept these papers, which—properly classified—would still be of use to the bureaus, which cannot yet be made available to the public, which have not yet been screened, and which are therefore very cumbersome. It is in this state of abandonment that loss and damage occur. To get away from this situation some intermediate depositories should be created, grouping by large administrative areas everything that is beyond the immediate use of the bureaus and that is to be retained not far away. The disposal actions, the transfers to such depositories, the appraisal of records, their protection and accessibility, all can be controlled easily enough by contractual disposition agreements (if effectively honored) between the archivists and responsible administrators.

The *third age* is wholly in the charge of Archival Services. The administrators, however, are not complete strangers to it: they have collaborated in the preliminary disposal, imposing on the records their own demands for conservation, and have expounded their authoritative views on the value of the documents. On the other hand, they remain always the privileged client of the archives, thus assuring the excellence of the retrospective documentation.

I have tried in the preceding lines to propose a new attitude toward current archives. Doing so in a certain confusion of which I am conscious (a confusion somewhat inherent in the delicate questions for which the terminology itself lacks precision), I have indeed "preached to my fellows." I would, however, have it known that I am convinced that the advantages of the plan that I recommend will not only benefit Archival Services but also will be for the greater good of Administration.