

The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States

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IF ARCHIVISTS WISH TO PURSUE the idea that there is such a concept as archival theory, they must first be willing to define that concept and then weigh their definition against the work done in the field so far. One approach would be to consider theory as the development of universal laws, and, if such laws are universal and immutable, they must be applicable on all occasions, regardless of time or place.¹ Archivists must therefore be able to frame hypotheses in universal form and test them against the evidence.

There is little, if anything, in the existing body of archival literature that follows such a procedure. What archivists generally refer to as *theory* is, more often than not, the Webster definition: "A belief, policy, or procedure proposed or followed as the basis for action."² Pure theory has no relation to action. If it did, it would be a plan or a process, not a theory. One must therefore separate *theoretical* from *practical* when considering whether or not there have been any universal laws abstractly developed in the archival world. One could refer to those laws developed from the piling up of empirical evidence and promulgated as the true faith on which we operate. Such are the *laws* of provenance, respect des fonds, unbroken custody, or Registraturprinzip. But on inspection we find two things: one, these laws are not immutable, but, being compiled from empirical studies, are limited in their applications to certain types of records in certain types of institutions; and, two, they are all of European derivation. American archivists, therefore, have little or no claim to the development of any archival theory.

One could immediately contend that such a statement is patently unfair to the great early thinkers of the American archival world—to Schellenberg, Posner, Holmes, Norton, Kahn, Buck, and others. Nevertheless, the contention is valid. A close examination of Schellenberg's work reveals considerable thought and individual contribution to an understanding of archival processes, but nothing that one could postulate as original archival theory. Perhaps the closest he comes to developing theory is in *Modern Archives*, on page 37, when he states that "The objectives in managing public records are to make the records serve the purposes for which they were created as cheaply and effectively as possible, and to make a proper disposition of them after they have served those purposes."³ But in

¹ Samuel H. Beer, "Political Science and History," in Melvin Richter, ed., *Essays in Theory and History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 41.

² *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1975), s.v. *theory*.

³ Theodore R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 37.

this, as in most of his writings, Schellenberg restricts his statement by making it apply to public records only. He does the same in his otherwise masterful National Archives Bulletin No. 8, *The Appraisal of Modern Public Records*. One wonders if such a law applies to all archives, everywhere—in the Vatican as well as Pocantico Hills.

It is important to note that when Schellenberg came that close to enunciating archival theory, he was on the lecture circuit and far removed from his daily tasks at the National Archives. The entire book, *Modern Archives*, in fact, is a compilation of lectures presented on an Australian trip funded by a Fulbright grant. On that tour, Schellenberg was freed from the constraints of attempting to find solutions to the problems facing him in the National Archives, and he could think abstractly, contemplating the nature of the archival problem and seeking ways of enunciating his thoughts before a foreign audience. It is important to note that, freed of the constraints of daily problem-solving, he yet developed a series of lectures that were pragmatic and reportorial rather than contemplative and theoretical. Schellenberg was not out to conceptualize the basic problem of archival management, but rather to instruct the Australians about contemporary western thought on the subject and to imbue them with American methodological applications. He was a missionary bringing the true faith to the heathen, not a theologian speculating on the nature of that true faith and its derivation.

Oliver W. Holmes, Margaret C. Norton, Herman Kahn, and Solon J. Buck did not go on a mission to Australia, or any other foreign land—although Holmes did have some duties in the Caribbean—and confined their didactic exercises to the domestic market. But they, too, were concerned about describing a framework of techniques that had been hammered out in the daily requirements of their various positions. The Holmes article on the five levels of arrangement was not the clarion call of some new theoretical concept, but rather the synthesis of current usage in the National Archives, then the proclaimed leader in the development of innovative techniques. Margaret Norton, whose lectures and writings have recently been collected for us in a book by Thornton Mitchell,⁴ dwells on the practical aspects of her tasks in Illinois, and how the solution to certain problems there may be of value to others elsewhere. Solon Buck was attempting to administer the newest and potentially largest national archives in the world and to train neophytes in the mysteries of archival administration, and his writings and lectures reflect these constraints. While Herman Kahn, in one of his more popular pieces, which was also his presidential address to the Society of American Archivists, confronted the question of what an archivist is,⁵ finally concluding that an archivist is sort of a historian with a practical bent, he did not confront the question of what archives are or how one should deal with them. Kahn too was daily engrossed in hiring new personnel and managing those who worked for him. His concerns were practical, and his discussions of archival problems rotated around this core of practicality that pervaded his daily life and that of his colleagues.

Perhaps among all of the innovators of that Society and those who expressed themselves well, Ernst Posner was in the best position to contemplate the immutable order of archival questions and to seek solutions through theoretical and universal laws. But Posner was, first and foremost, a historian. His writings reflect the work of one who is trained to study the past and to report on it. He developed histories of archival activity, he explained root causes, trends, the development of techniques, the elaboration of systems. He commented on what was and what should have been, what met standard criteria and what did not, where we have been and where we should go. In short, Posner was a reporter and a teacher. He expounded no new theories nor did he delve deeply into the basic nature of archival problems. Rather he was content to diagnose the complaints and prescribe cures.

⁴ Thornton W. Mitchell, ed., *Norton on Archives. The Writings of Margaret Cross Norton on Archival and Records Management* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975).

⁵ Kahn, Herman, "Some Comments on the Archival Vocation," *American Archivist* 34 (Jan. 1971): 3-12.

In retrospect, this is disappointing. Posner was perhaps in the best position among his contemporaries and peers for plumbing the depths of the sub-archival phenomena that later erupted as the archival problems that his contemporaries had to face. Posner, among all of his peers, had no payroll to meet, no imperative to confront daily crises. His workshop was the classroom and the halls of academia, spawning ground of intellectual thought and the contemplation of cause as well as effect. He could have well afforded to turn his mind to an analysis of the true nature of records and society's creation of them, their variety, idiosyncrasies, and interrelationships; and he could have implanted in the minds of his students the seeds of his thoughts to see if they would grow; and to nurture an entire landscape of new and exotic varieties of thought, conjecture, and theory about the nature of man and man's record of himself. From all that, perhaps, some universal truths and laws would have emerged. But they did not.

It is fair to say, therefore, that, to date, there has been no elucidation of archival theory in the United States and little, if any, in the rest of the world.

What, then, is the nature of the theory for which we are searching and which has not yet appeared? If theory is the development of universal laws immutable and applicable at all times, in all places, the theory that we are seeking would, at least in the abstract, analyze certain demonstrable conditions, postulate their effects, and determine how they would affect the transmission of information to those in need of such information. The theoretical assumptions should be based not on the structure but on the nature of human organizations, and on humans themselves; not on how something was accomplished or not, but why it succeeded or failed. When we try to respond to the question "Why?," instead of to either "What?" or "How?," we find that the hot, agitated atmosphere of the workplace, under the glare of the imperative for pragmatic solutions, is not only not conducive to the growth of theory, but patently destructive of it. Theory can only grow in the cool and contemplative conditions of the cloister, i.e., in the classroom and its concomitant academic setting.

What, then, is there to theorize about? To what should one turn one's mind when the pressures are off and time has lost its tyranny? Certainly not the same areas so overploughed by the archival writers of this century: the mundane matters of arrangement and description, the techniques of microfilming or lamination, the dendritical structure of organizational records, archival education for librarians, editing and producing archival publications, coping with faculty papers, the use of outside funding to supplement appropriations, electronic and non-electronic storage media (what else is there?), and other topics discussed at any annual meeting of the archival society. It is time for at least a segment of the archival community to address the larger questions, some of which can only lead to theoretical assumptions. Then the task for the working archivist will be to test those assumptions against practice. Those that prove valid will then be entered into the canon of archival thought and take their places as immutable laws of the profession. A few questions come to mind:

What is it within the nature of society that makes it create the records that it does? Is the impulse a purely practical one, or is there something in the human psyche that dictates the keeping of a record, and what is the motivation for that act? By determining motivation, perhaps we can devise practices that will satisfy a basic human need.

What are the sociological aspects of records management? Do we know why, and not just how, certain human organizations—government, the church, corporations, institutions—function the way they do? Does a better understanding of their internal rationale provide a clue to the manner in which their records could best serve them, and transmit to future researchers not just *what* happened in institution XYZ, but *why* it was destined to happen that way?

What is the nature of history, historical fact, and historical thought? What are the facts, and how do they affect interpretations? How can we move to assure the Ciceronian law

for historians: "The first law for the historian is that he shall never dare utter an untruth. The second is that he shall suppress nothing that is true."⁶ But should the archivist be concerned that what he is preserving is truth, or just evidence? Records must be respected, and it is axiomatic that we should provide records that are respectable. But do records establish facts? Or are records just interpretations of the facts by the records creators? Can we respond to Murray Murphy's contention that "Historical facts are not established from pure data—they are postulated to explain characteristics of the data. Thus, the sharp division between fact and interpretation upon which the classical view insisted, and which the revisionists have accepted, does not exist."⁷ Are we certain that today's facts are also those of tomorrow, that what we preserve is really a reflection of times past or present rather than a reflection of our interpretation of that past and present? We must test what one author postulates: "Every step of producing history presumes theoretical models of man and society, which in turn, seem to change in terms of the shifting conceptions of man and society occurring in the historian's own society. . . . Thus, the limits of the historian's objectivity, like those of the social scientist, are the theoretical conceptions present in his own society."⁸ What are the theoretical conceptions present in today's society that will color the acquisition or retention policies of archives, and how can archivists rise above their own social and intellectual environment in order to provide some assurance that they are not being interpretive in their eagerness to be objective? Can we really foresee what segment of today's records will be needed by researchers of the future; and, if we cannot, then what countermeasures do we take as archivists to reduce the impact of our interpretive actions?

Another area almost completely ignored in archival writing is a study of the nature of the decision-making process in the management and operation of a corporate body. At what levels are decisions really made, and by what process? How does that process affect what records will be kept to document the policy developments of the corporate body? Are we so imbued with the archival standard of keeping the records of the board of trustees, the president, the executive secretary, and the divisional officers, that we are retaining the chaff while throwing out the wheat?⁹ There are some studies taking place among management organizations, one hears, that look into such problems; but do archivists even realize that the problems are also theirs, if they are to fulfill an obligation to the future to retain records representing a reasonably exact facsimile of today's society?

Is anyone concerned about the place of archives in society, or even the role of archives in society and their contribution to the commonweal? Who are we and why are we here? Do we really deserve the image of being antiquarians probing after moldy utilities, an image engendered in the past and liable to continue in the minds of many unless we give some thought to our *raison d'être*, beyond that very limited objective stated by Schellenberg earlier?¹⁰

And, perhaps most important of all, what is there in human nature that stirs an impulse to revere artifacts? Is such an impulse universal, even among Eskimos, Australian aborigines, Amazonian tribesmen? Or is the urge to save, and to revere that which is saved, a product of culture, learning, and sophistication? Is the urge to preserve and to hold a

⁶ Cicero, *De Oratore* 2. 62.

⁷ Murray G. Murphy, *Our Knowledge of the Historical Past* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, Inc., 1973), p. 102.

⁸ Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *A Behavioral Approach to Historical Analysis* (New York: The Free Press, 1969), pp. 24-25.

⁹ Report of the Joint Committee on the Archives of Science and Technology. Draft report, January 1980, p. 5, *passim*.

¹⁰ See note 3, above. In the area of public records, Schellenberg confronts this problem in National Archives Bulletin No. 8, *The Appraisal of Modern Public Records*, p. 244.

document in high value a recent phenomenon, and, if so, when and why did it begin? Or is it an outgrowth of the Judeo-Christian ethic, like retaining a piece of the True Cross, the Temple's original Torah, or the manuscript diaries of Brigham Young? And what is the difference between information and the medium on which that information has been inscribed? Is the medium the message? Does proof of contract lie only in the written word, signed and sealed, so that the Magna Carta itself is the guarantee of rights, and not just the information imparted in the document? Do archivists confuse the artifact value of their documents with artifact values in museums and art galleries? Is the nature of information such that man will be satisfied to receive it in a surrogate form, and not care if the original is discarded? Why do we retain originals when copies have been made; and, at some point in time, should original documents that have been copied be transferred to museums to be treated as craft artifacts, while the archivist remains concerned only with the information from the documents, which has been suitably transformed into a more usable form? Should the Declaration of Independence be in the Smithsonian along with the Hope Diamond and the Spirit of St. Louis? As an artifact that has been faithfully reproduced thousands of times, it has, after all, assumed the same status as a non-operative curiosity. In short, have archives become great reliquaries, rather than information centers, and what is the true mystique of the original document in a Coca-Cola generation that prides itself on having access to "the real thing"?

If these are some of the questions that should be addressed, who, then, will address them? It is reasonable to expect that on slow days and after hours, when one's spouse is otherwise occupied, the kids are in bed, and the income tax is finished, a few archivists will contemplate these mysteries. If they investigate the questions deeply enough, they may find themselves bumping into that mixed breed of librarians, cultural anthropologists, social scientists, humanists, computer specialists, and a few archivists, who now class themselves as information specialists, not caring about the medium but merely the message. They might also discover that a few sociologists are studying the nature of organizations, analyzing the process of decision-making and the formulation of organizational policy. Perhaps some will be offering a course to cover such topics as the irrelevance of official statistics; multiple realities; the retrospective construction of reality; the deed as father to the thought; the draping of the historical mantle; loose coupling; and mystification.

One might also look to the historian, formerly the proud and paternal cohort of the archivist, but more recently the parent who skipped out and hasn't been heard from for a decade or more. Most teaching historians still maintain a disdain for the nature of sources, and are more concerned with their content. One need only read the reviews of documentary publications, the *Papers of John C. Calhoun*, Booker T. Washington, or a multitude of others, to see how superficially the historian reviewers concern themselves with archival integrity. They do not view the works from the perspective of how well they duplicate the original document, or how faithful the editor is to the nature of the collection that is being reproduced; they concentrate on the contents of the document and thus completely miss the point of reviewing documentary editions. Archivists, who should seriously concern themselves with such editions, have also abrogated much of their professional responsibility in this area. The announcement of new projects in documentary reproduction, either in book or microform form, is not carried in national or regional archival society newsletters, and few such projects are reviewed in the archival journals, even though archivists are the best qualified professionals to prepare thoughtful reviews. This lack of concern for document integrity, archival principles, and primary issues indicates a bankruptcy in the historical and archival world, and thus engenders little anticipation that theoretical considerations will receive much attention from either field.

A future look at archival theory, therefore, is at best clouded; at worst, totally obscured; and probably a bit myopic as a norm. It is clear that the great thoughts to be dwelled upon will come from the classroom, but not from the archival classroom as it is known today. We are confronted with archival training under the guise of archival education. Students

are taught what and how, but not why. We have the two-week institute; the non-credit traveling workshop; the credit-earning but often discredited 3-credit "archives course" patched into a library curriculum to provide the students with "scope"; the officially sanctioned professional curriculum that concentrates on the practicum as the core of the training, thus assuring the student of "stack rat" status from the beginning; the uncoordinated parade of "instructors" (with no common syllabus, lecture approach, or standards), to which most archival students are subjected in the plethora of jury-rigged institutes. These are producing a large corps of parish priests when no one has bothered to devise a theology under whose standard they can act. The theologians, or those who ask "why," rather than "how," must come from the seminary, where those conditions conducive to quiet contemplation can be cultivated. Ironically, as a result of adverse conditions in the marketplace for scholars, the conditions for developing a seminarian approach are ripening. Historians are in abundant supply. They are seeking alternatives to classroom careers. Academic history departments, therefore, are reaching for ways to prepare their students for the marketplace in adjunct fields: archives, museums, historical societies, etc. But, being academicians, they are not content with the "quick fix," the workshop, the institute. They feel that the study of archival management must be integrated into the history curriculum, and should involve some broader principles than the mere study of processes. History departments are in larger divisions, for the most part, either of the humanities or social sciences. They have broader requirements to educate, beyond the task-oriented training of most archival education. They are looking for rationales, for basic concepts, for means of fitting the archivist into the warp and woof of society, for the *theory* behind the practice. They are there to educate, not to train. It is, therefore, from the academy that future archival theory will emerge, and the irony is that it is just that academic setting that practicing archivists are today denigrating. They feel that the academicians do not understand archives, and are not employing archivists to teach the curriculum. This is the old craft-mystique argument that the only validly qualified practitioners of obstetrics are mothers.

There is hope for the archival profession if there are two results from this new academic wave of interest in the nature and theory of archives and archival management. One result must be that the archival profession itself should realize that it is both a science and a craft. If it looks to other professions in widely divergent fields, it will see that its current experience is not unique. In medicine and law, practice came before theory; and both fields developed academically long after they were operating on the street, so to speak. It is often, in fact, necessary to attack the basics, identify problems, and reveal and air opposing views before there is enough substance to justify moving the profession into the classroom. The librarians made that transition about forty or fifty years ago, and are now developing their educational system in laboratory settings that are not preoccupied with practical applications in the field.

In addition, if the profession is to progress, certain archivists must make the move from the workplace to the academy, not just for one day a week, or one week a year, but as a permanent career commitment. And, once there, they must realign themselves with the academic historians and those in related disciplines that touch on the nature of information, the management of dynamics of corporate bodies such as government and the church, and meld their concepts into the new philosophy of archives as records of human experience. Ultimately, given enough courses in enough good academic settings, the study of archives will produce a body of basic principles, a system of immutable laws, a litany of theory and dogma. Like all other theories, each hypothesis will engender counter-hypotheses; but at least there will be intellectual discussion of the questions involved, linkage with sister disciplines in the discovery of transcendent concepts, a body of literature and counter-literature that will ultimately support challenges, analyses of counter-trends, heuristic exercises, taxonomic systems, paradigmatic explications, and unimpeachable antitheses leading to further Hegelian progressions.

That day is not here, but it will come. And it will come partly as a result of crisis—crisis in the historical profession, and a lesser crisis in the archival world—as archivists seek substance and try to confront the feeling that others are subverting the profession by taking over the scholarly training within it. And, maybe, as a reaction to the crises on both sides, there will emerge that reconciliation of the estranged parent and child, both having matured and recognized that each has a place in the other's existence, a return to rationality and the concept that archives and history—archivists and historians—share the same heritage; that there are academic historians and archivists just as there are non-academics. Then there will be no Brahmins and no untouchables, only theoreticians and clinicians. Perhaps the attainment of that goal should be the program for the second fifty years of the archivists, and the second hundred of the historians.

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