# Social History and Archival Practice

FREDRIC M. MILLER

The relationship between the writing of history and the keeping of records has always been close and complex. Modern historical methodology was developed in the nineteenth century on the basis of available archives and manuscripts. In turn, current archival practices still derive from the kind of history produced by that methodology: a history devoted to formalized political and economic institutions and to the lives of the prominent. However, the last two decades have seen the elaboration of a "new social history," concerned with social structure and the attitudes, activities, and daily lives of ordinary people. The symbiotic relationship between the archival and historical professions means that the trend will eventually affect all phases of archival work. Obviously each particular repository will be affected differently, and some may not need to change at all. But the direction of historical studies is now so well established that important adaptations on our part are clearly in order. By its nature, social history presents a special challenge, and this article is a general discussion both of the field and of some changes which may be appropriate in our accepted theories and methods.

Unfortunately, no one has ever satisfactorily defined or set the boundaries of social history, though people seem to know it when they see it. In general terms, social history must be understood both as a set of subjects and as a set of methodologies. Several overlapping national and intellectual traditions form its background in the United States. The Progressive era's "New History," of Turner, Beard, and Robinson, was a conscious effort to employ, in the words of Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., "the new conceptions and fresh points of view afforded by the scientific study of economics, sociology, and politics."[1] This social-science orientation remains at the center of social history, and the list of disciplines now includes anthropology, demography, geography, and psychology. However, the Progressives themselves emphasized economic structure and rarely dealt with the lives of common citizens beyond organized labor or agrarian movements. Much the same can be said of contemporary European historians, who, working primarily in the Marxist tradition, saw the history of the masses as the history of class struggle. In Britain, after World War II, older labor-history traditions were combined with a more sophisticated Marxist approach to produce studies of work, class, and protest, which have immensely influenced American social historians. This contemporary Marxism combines an interest in power, change, and the lives of the oppressed with a rejection of the simple reductionism which argued that all social life was eco-

[1] Arthur Schlesinger, *New Viewpoints in American History* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1922), p. vii.

nomically determined. Britain was also home to the "men and manners" school with which the term social history was long identified. G. M. Trevelyan summarized his *English Social History* in 1944 as "history with the politics left out," documenting daily life, taste, fashion, and style.[2] More difficult for American historians to assimilate has been the French *Annales* school, which takes its name from *Annales d'Histoire Economique et Sociale,* founded by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch in 1929. The *Annales* historians advocate a total scientific history of society in terms of physical environment, enduring structures, cultural assumptions, and differential rates of change. In pursuit of that goal, they use the most advanced techniques of mathematics, the social sciences, and linguistics, and are more concerned with the analysis of systems than with specific events.[3]

Though American scholars could draw on the work of the great Progressive historians and a few home-grown Marxists, social history in this country really dates from the early 1960s and to some extent has continued to follow European precedents. For example, Herbert Gutman's pioneering 1973 study of the American working class was explicitly modeled on the work of British historians, especially E. P. Thompson, whose *Making of the English Working Class* appeared in 1963.[4] In the sixties, such foreign influences combined with the ongoing theoretical/methodological challenge of the social sciences, the development of computer technology, and various national crises to produce what Michael Frisch has called "the hothouse atmosphere of recent American scholarship."[5] Out of it, black, family, women's, urban, and ethnic history all suddenly emerged. The breakdown of the liberal consensus also encouraged the peculiarly American obsession with the study of individual social and geographic mobility. Labor and Marxist history, which are by no means identical, were both revived and came out of long-imposed ghettoes.

In recent years we have witnessed the arrival from France of "structuralism," which holds, among much else, that social history must include the study of common myths and symbols, collective mentalities, and the understanding of both language and physical structure as "signs."[6] Even without this latest complication, practitioners of the various specialities noted above were already divided, by the early seventies, between two broad methodological orientations. One group works in a positivist, behaviorist, and narrowly quantitative tradition. They have been commonly labelled "cliometricians." The other is oriented toward anthropology and sociology, Marxist or Weberian, and more easily accepts qualitative sources. Their basic interest is the application of interdisciplinary theory to history. Recognition of this distinction, and the probable addition of a structuralist, cultural approach, is important for archivists, since social history is often mistakenly identified exclusively with quantification.

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[2] Richard T. Vann, "The Rhetoric of Social History," *Journal of Social History* 10 (Winter 1976): 222. The entire Winter 1976 issue of this journal is entitled *Social History Today . . . and Tomorrow?*

[3] One of the best, easily accessible discussions of the *Annales* school is the articles by Fernand Braudel, H. R. Trevor-Roper, and J. H. Hexter in a special issue of the *Journal of Modern History* 44 (December 1972): 447–539. See also Fernand Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life, 1400–1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

[4] Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1976); and Edward P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963).

[5] Michael Frisch, "American Urban History as an Example of Recent Historiography," *History and Theory* 18 (1979): 352. See also Eric Hobsbawm, "From Social History to the History of Society," *Daedalus* 100 (Winter 1971): 20–45.

[6] See John Blair, "Structuralism, American Studies and the Humanities," *American Quarterly* 30 (Summer 1978): 261–81; David Pace, "Structuralism in History and the Social Sciences," ibid.: 282–97; and Allan Megill, "Foucault, Structuralism and the Ends of History," *Journal of Modern History* 51 (September 1979): 451–503.

As it matured in the late seventies, American social history was certainly something new, distinct from both its indigenous Progressive and Marxist predecessors. Its growth was evident in the distribution of new dissertations. Figures from the *Journal of American History* for 1979 list 203 titles in the general area of social history (including urban, women's, and black studies), as opposed to 157 in the traditional areas of politics, diplomacy, and war; 144 in intellectual and cultural history; and 57 in economic history.[7] These numbers are important, for the most common objection to change in a profession such as ours is that we must never cater to a special audience, never be carried away by passing fads. As a service profession, our concern must be with the mainstream. But now the fad—social history—seems to have become the mainstream. In 1980, one of the periodic reviews of the profession sponsored by the American Historical Association appeared under the title: *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States* (Cornell University Press). Reviewing it for the New York *Times,* Gertrude Himmelfarb wrote that "the historian reading this volume may well conclude 'We are all social historians now.' "[8] The growth of the field has been sustained over two decades, and its position is no longer in question. To have called, in 1965, for a comprehensive review of archival practice in terms of social history would have been rash, though prescient; to do so in 1981 is merely realistic.

Social history is a field as diffuse as it is growing. The two hundred 1979 dissertations ranged from sex typing in higher education to the occupational structure of New Jersey. What set them apart as social history was, in theory at least, an attempt to analyze processes affecting large numbers of ordinary citizens. One historian wrote, as the seventies ended, that "the single most important line of division among American historians separates those who see all historical particulars in terms of the evolution of social structures from those who do not."[9] The former are social historians; the latter essentially political and intellectual historians.

Beyond this general definition, social historians share a few other common characteristics. Their attempt to reconstruct life in detail often leads to a concentration on small groups or communities, as in the recent, highly praised works on Lynn, Massachusetts; Rockdale, Pennsylvania; and the Amoskeag mills of Manchester, New Hampshire.[10] Their desire for comparable results and their attempt to discern patterns over time produce a widely varying dependence on numerical data, testable hypotheses, and model building. Their orientation toward the vast, mute segments of society demands a reinterpretation of traditional written sources in terms of unintended meanings and hidden evidence. This tendency to concentrate on the oppressed and the poor has both historiographic and political aspects. Historiographically, one of social history's great and unquestioned achievements has been to discover and re-create, through innovative sources and techniques, the lives of the large and significant bottom layers of society, not simply stopping the story with the organized male workers. Politically, American social historians tend to range from liberal to Marxist, "conservative social historians being no more numerous than Republican folk singers."[11] Explicit dis-

[7] "Recent Dissertations," *Journal of American History* 65 (March 1979): 1242–57; and ibid., 66 (June, September, December 1979): 263–72, 521–28, 774–83.

[8] Gertrude Himmelfarb, "The New History," *New York Times Book Review,* 17 August 1980, p. 3.

[9] Lawrence Veysey, "The New Social History in the Context of American Historical Writing," *Reviews in American History* 7 (March 1979): 2.

[10] Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976); Anthony Wallace, *Rockdale: The Growth of an American Village in the Early Industrial Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1978); and Tamara Harevan and Rudolph Langenbach, *Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory-City* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

[11] Vann, "The Rhetoric of Social History," p. 233.

cussions about the goals or moral purpose of research trends and specific studies are common. Yet American social history, in comparison with European, has remained traditionally pragmatic, essentially concerned with giving the "facts."

A final characteristic of the field is increasing balkanization, a tendency which also affects archivists involved in social history. Elizabeth Pleck, who has argued strongly against artificial divisions between subjects like the history of the family and the history of work, posed the not farfetched case of a study of Irish mill girls in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Is this labor, women's, ethnic, family, urban, religious, or quantitative history, or all of them, six specialties and one methodology in a single monograph?[12] The rhetorical point is important for archivists, as the excessive compartmentalization of social history can lead us to ignore its significance as a holistic way of approaching the past, both intellectually and methodologically.

Archivists and manuscripts curators are necessarily more concerned with application than definition. And in many instances we, or at least our holdings, have been the victims of the ire of social historians. A common feeling was summarized in the admonition that "the historian should be intensely skeptical of literary sources of evidence, always the product of elites, instead making use of whatever quantitative data exist to assure that one's conclusions are truly representative of the social aggregate being discussed."[13] From a less numerical but more political point of view, Frisch noted "the central methodological dilemma of the 'bottom up' approach to the new social history: how to transcend the limits of the conventional sources and the questions of conventional historians in order to retrieve the experience and, hopefully, the consciousness of those long excluded from a central place in American historical processes."[14] Of course, in this critique archivists supply the conventional sources one must transcend.

Fortunately the transcending, for many of the best social historians, involves a reassessment rather than a rejection of archival materials. Gutman, for example, uses a great deal of printed and manuscript evidence in his studies of popular beliefs, class relations, and the nature of work; and he was influential in deflating the heavily quantitative study on slavery, *Time on the Cross.*[15] The current status of quantification in social history is problematic. Of necessity, it remains crucial to the study of large groups. Yet there is a discernible reaction against the temptation to identify numbers with reality, and a recognition that the numbers themselves may be simply incorrect. Influenced by structuralist theory, the French avant-garde has abandoned the computer in favor of the folk memory, as in Le Roy Ladurie's spectacularly successful *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error,* a work based on what we might call a fourteenth-century oral history transcription.[16] In a similar vein, American social historians are showing considerable interest in the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, an advocate of a "thick description" of culturally significant episodes through the perceptions of participants.[17] It is now understood that, as with other social-science disciplines, a naive faith in figures and statistical techniques was a sign of the immaturity of the field. These developments provide archivists with significant opportunities. Nevertheless, a strong, ingrained

[12] Elizabeth Pleck, "Two Worlds in One," *Journal of Social History* 10 (Winter 1976): 178.
[13] Veysey, "The New Social History," pp. 4–5.
[14] Frisch, "American Urban History," p. 358.
[15] Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1974).
[16] Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1978).
[17] See Clifford Geertz, "Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of American Thought," *American Scholar* 49 (Spring 1980): 165–79; and *The Social History of an Indonesian Town* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1965).

suspicion of idiosyncratic, nonsystematic archival sources remains. Thus James Henretta, a prominent social historian, and no cliometrician, criticized *Rockdale* for its "overreliance on elite literary sources," consisting of collections of personal papers, calling this a "persistent documentary bias [which] makes *Rockdale* less a social history of a community than an anthropology of its elite."[18]

Archivists should understand not only this attitude, but the considerable justification behind it. For both archival materials and the archival profession have become increasingly irrelevant to social-science research in this country, of which social history forms a part. While social scientists have become involved with numbers, surveys, and theoretical models, archivists have been preoccupied since the 1940s with administration and technical problems. As early as 1948, Irving Schiller was criticizing American archivists for concentrating on such issues while neglecting their intellectual responsibilities.[19] The subordination of the National Archives to the General Services Administration since 1949 has certainly not served to reverse that tendency. In general, the archival profession on all levels, public and private, was overwhelmed by the mass of paper pouring forth from mid-twentieth-century bureaucracies, paper which, social scientists pointed out, usually said more about the bureaucracy than about the society. The concerns of the profession are reflected in its literature. Few articles on the new areas of research have appeared, and most of these deal with ethnic or family history, usually in their oral or institutional manifestations.[20] Only two years after F. Gerald Ham called on archivists to assume a "more active and perhaps more creative role" in documenting contemporary society, the 1977 Conference on Priorities for Historical Records placed "Archival Research Centers" last in an ordering of funding priorities which began with "Intellectual Control," "Professional Archival Training," and "Conservation and Preservation."[21] The implication is that our major need is to fund the preservation and processing, by trained professionals, of our current holdings.

The problem is that the holdings themselves are seen by many social historians as useless or, worse, positively misleading, as Henretta's critique of *Rockdale* indicates. Researchers who ignore archives or manuscripts bearing on their topics are usually not unaware of the existence of the materials, and public relations efforts cannot force them to use collections. The building blocks of social history continue to be the census, tax and probate records, city directories, property atlases, rollbooks, membership ledgers, and case files, materials which give some consistent access to the average individual and family. If we want any other materials used as something other than frosting on a quantified cake, we will have to take the initiative in changing our policies, beginning with acquisitions and appraisal.

The drawbacks of current acquisition strategies are best understood in terms of the holdings of modern manuscript repositories. The bias of a repository which concentrates on the personal or family papers of the wealthy and socially prominent is, by now, widely acknowledged. And, as Linda Henry of the National Council of Negro Women recently pointed out, that class bias operates for Blacks and women as well as

[18] James Henretta, "An Anthropology of an Elite," *Reviews in American History* 7 (September 1979): 366.

[19] H. G. Jones, *Records of a Nation* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1969), pp. 38–39.

[20] Nicholas V. Montalto, "The Challenge of Preservation in a Pluralistic Society," *American Archivist* 41 (October 1978): 399–404; Richard N. Juliani, "The Use of Archives in the Study of Immigration and Ethnicity," ibid. 39 (October 1976): 469–77; and David E. Kyvig, "Family History: New Opportunities for Archivists," ibid. 38 (October 1975): 509–19.

[21] Walter Rundell, Jr., and C. Herbert Finch, "The State of Historical Records: A Summary," *American Archivist* 40 (July 1977): 343–47.

for the traditional scapegoat, the white male.[22] The problems with institutional records are more subtle. For our purposes, they are also more serious; for the most visible archival response to the new social history has been the establishment of repositories, usually university-based, which collect records in specialized fields like ethnic, urban, and labor studies. Such repositories have been innovative in their collecting policies, but they have encountered severe limitations in the availability and form of materials. To put it succinctly, the subjects have changed faster than the sources. Social history archives usually get their records from a segment of society, regardless of ethnic or racial origin, which is almost as elitist as that which supports the most conservative historical societies. Middle or upper middle class reformers and/or bureaucrats dominate the files, and it is their view of the world which is preserved. If they appear at all, the upper classes assume the role of philanthropists. The poor are either victims or clients. Working people rarely appear at all, outside of union membership lists. Everyone is seen through the veil of institutional life.

Though the range of subjects documented has significantly expanded, it too has definite limits. Most modern social history collections document aspects of life that are strongly institutionalized and yet peripheral to both daily life and economic decision making. Social pathology and its amelioration, public administration, and organized fraternal activities are well documented, as are the efforts of every liberal reformer in American history. But the wealth of documentation on issues like public housing as opposed to real estate practices, social services as opposed to corporate investment decisions, or ethnic festivals as opposed to labor union organizing, becomes a barrier to understanding by skewing reality. Huge areas of recent American social history are virtually untouched by archival work, including the development of suburbs; the workings of political machines; the experience of the black and European migrations; popular culture; evangelical religion; and the impact of various government programs, from education through transportation, on the community or neighborhood level. With all our records of ameliorative and fraternal organizations, we have acquired relatively little on the key elements of an advanced capitalist society, the corporations and the unions, and on the places where most Americans now live, the suburbs. Thus, even the advances in collecting have fallen short of the social historian's ideal of recreating the lives of ordinary citizens and the structure of human interaction. Of course materials collected have been worth preserving, and the work done thus far is necessary for the documentation of social history, if not sufficient.

Several steps can be taken to improve the situation. Collecting policies should be framed with deliberate consideration of the limitations of subject and source. Policies could be directed toward the broadest possible level of citizen organization and participation, PTAs and neighborhood groups, for example, and toward major business and labor organizations, with such restrictions as are required to preserve the records. Key individuals active in specific matters should be approached on the basis of their contributions in those fields, rather than on the basis of the preservation of their personal or family papers. Archivists should examine the scope of their mandate, in terms of both the real distribution of power and the nature of work in their parent organizations. This is not to advocate the adoption of some elaborate theoretical model as a collecting guideline. Theory changes too often for that to be desirable, and we do have other audiences to serve. However, existing strategies have definite implications for the scholarly value of our holdings. Without a conscious reorientation, repositories will continue to be

[22] Linda J. Henry, "Collecting Policies of Special-Subject Repositories," *American Archivist* 43 (Winter 1980): 57–63.

filled with the records of well-meaning reformers and institutionalized good will, while the common people and the economic powers together go relatively undocumented.

Archivists were able to shift to new subjects and new ethnic group leaders as sources in the 1960s and 1970s. They should be able to make further changes in the 1980s, aggressively seeking out materials in underdocumented areas. New institutional forms may be appropriate, such as small "suburban" archives at junior or community colleges, established to utilize local contacts in preserving records while enhancing the schools' scholarly resources. Hugh Taylor has suggested that, in view of "the gaps in what has been permanently preserved," we should consider "a kind of paper archaeology whereby as complete a configuration as possible of documentary survival is uncovered within a limited area."[23]

A direct, though controversial, method of documenting the experience of the ordinary citizen is oral history. Its intellectual and technical problems are well known to archivists. The creation of evidence is not normally our province. However, we must recognize that the use of scattered diaries and letters, one of the very few ways of documenting popular life in the last century, has become inapplicable. But oral history on a very large scale is now feasible and provides us with an opportunity no group of archivists and historians has had before. And as William Moss pointed out, "in the absence of primary evidence, an aggregate of testimony may serve to approximate historical certainty."[24] While many thousands of people who experienced the great migrations from Europe and the Southern Black Belt, the virtual disappearance of rural America, and the union battles of the 1920s and 1930s are still living, it would be irresponsible for us to pass up the opportunity to record their memories. Recently, oral history as community history has shown signs of both widespread popularity and academic utility. Perhaps as American social historians followed the British, so we should begin to emulate Britain's successful history workshop movement.[25]

The surviving universe of documentation is as much a function of appraisal as of acquisition strategies. The new social history may require not merely a modification of existing appraisal standards but a fundamental change in our whole way of thinking about the subject. Revised criteria could apply not only to future acquisitions, but also to materials currently being received and processed, in which the potential research value for social history is obscured by traditional evaluation. American principles of appraisal, having been developed more recently, are more cognizant of social and economic themes than are their European counterparts. However, like other archival principles, they are ultimately based on the kind of history done in the late nineteenth century. Thus the common definition of appraisal lists the key factors in evaluating records as "their current administrative, legal, and fiscal use; their evidential and informational or research value; their arrangement and their relationship to other records."[26] This definition, and most archival literature, seems to give more weight to description of institutional life than to the experience of people involved in or affected by the institution. Informational values are regarded as important, but in some sense subordinate to the ultimate purpose of archives, which remains the preservation of structure, procedures, and policies as reflected in the files. In his SAA manual on appraisal, Maynard Brichford wrote that "The spe-

[23] Hugh A. Taylor, "Into the Nineteen Eighties," *American Archivist* 42 (October 1979): 551–52.

[24] William W. Moss, "Oral History: An Appreciation," *American Archivist* 40 (October 1977): 439.

[25] Ronald L. Filippelli, "Collecting the Records of Industrial Society in Great Britain: Progress and Promise," *American Archivist* 40 (October 1977): 404–5.

[26] Frank B. Evans, et al., "A Basic Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers" *American Archivist* 37 (July 1974): 417, s.v. *Appraisal.*

cial obligation to promote the serious study of institutional records makes the archivist an advocate of institutional history."[27]

It need not be so. The statement is more a justification of present reality than an inescapable rule. And with current trends in history and the social sciences, we would do well to avoid bondage to institutional studies. What is important for future generations is what our holdings reveal about human activity. Certainly for the twentieth century an emphasis on evidential and administrative values is questionable. On the most practical level, explicit organizational functions, procedures, and policies are usually well documented in various published or widely duplicated formats. In the ahistorical United States, the administrators and bureaucrats for whom theorists like Hilary Jenkinson wanted to make archives into an "artificial memory" are rarely interested in precedents more than a few years old, usually still in active files.[28] More important, archivists seem to ignore professionally what they must know from experience: that the purpose of contemporary organizational records is as much to obscure as to enlighten. The board minutes of the most prestigious private organizations or government agencies often have less relation to reality than the most casual oral history transcript. Slighting or vigorously sampling a mass of program or case files while meticulously preserving minutes, reports, and memoranda may represent misplaced priorities. Evidential values have a place, but that place depends on the nature of the organization and the clientele of the repository. Working in the vanguard of the archival profession, Charles Dollar has noted that appraisal standards for machine-readable records already "differ in significant ways from those for textual records," adding that "informational value is usually the basic concern."[29] The goal in terms of social history is to document the history of people rather than the history of organizations.

Our approach to the appraisal of records should change in detail as well as in general orientation. In an article on business records, Francis Blouin urged archivists to recognize the existential importance of a record, the information revealed by the simple fact of its existence.[30] Similarly, for social history archivists must learn to think in terms of the paradoxical importance of the mundane and the ordinary. Increasing amounts of machine-readable data on individuals are now available to archivists, and the computer has invalidated the objection that such massive files cannot be utilized. Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania's Philadelphia Social History Project—the largest such undertaking in the United States—specifically prefer voluminous records to small collections, standardized bits of comparable data to extended descriptions, original questionnaires to summarized tabulations, and, above all, the typical to the unique.[31] None of these preferences coincides with conventional canons of appraisal. Yet all are fundamental to the study of social history.

Clearly, research trends have called some of our appraisal principles into question. The new social history certainly carries some unhappy implications in the short run, in terms of increased costs and space requirements. But such considerations must be viewed in the context of the whole *raison d'être* of our repositories. First, we must decide what manuscript collections and archives are supposed to do. Only then can

[27] Maynard J. Brichford, *Archives and Manuscripts: Appraisal and Accessioning* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1977), pp. 9–10.

[28] Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration* (London: Percy Lund, Humphries & Co., 1965), p. 153.

[29] Charles M. Dollar, "Appraising Machine-Readable Records," *American Archivist* 41 (October 1978): 423, 424.

[30] Francis X. Blouin, Jr., "A New Perspective on the Appraisal of Business Records: A Review," *American Archivist* 42 (July 1979): 320.

[31] "A Special Issue: Philadelphia Social History Project," *Historical Methods Newsletter* 9 (1976): 41–181.

we discuss the allocation of scarce resources to accomplish specific goals. Shrinking budgets do not form the best environments in which to assume new responsibilities. But such times of crisis often provide the opportunity for the kind of comprehensive re-evaluation easily avoided in more complacent periods. Further, temporary financial problems should not blind us to ongoing improvements in photocopying, microform, and computer technology, especially in the areas of compatibility, miniaturization, access, storage capacity, and, significantly, unit-cost reductions.[32] At some point in the future, such developments, combined with revived funding, will enable us to implement standards for appraisal and retention which now may seem impractical. A reluctance to attempt to document broader segments of society, based on financial exigency, poses the serious danger that public and private repositories will enter a vicious cycle in which obsolescence and reduced support feed on each other.

Like appraisal, technical processing also requires new approaches. Discussing large, modern collections, Richard Berner has written that "the central problem is one of providing subject access to sources."[33] But our principles now call for arrangement according to structure, file system, and form, and description primarily by lists. Not only does this represent our usual organizational bias—Richard Lytle calls it a "creator-oriented" system[34]—but it harks back to the leisurely and unhurried methodology of an older historical scholarship. The way we arrange and describe our record groups and manuscript collections makes it clear that our orientation is toward biography and organizational narrative rather than toward the kind of interdisciplinary and subject-oriented research that is more prevalent today. Perhaps because of procedures designed out of necessity at the National Archives, the profession has tended to deemphasize subject access. But most repositories do not have the concerns of NARS, and should be able to concentrate more on information than on physical control and inventory description. Instead, we all continue to produce inventories based on the principles of provenance and original order and arranged by series and folder. Unhappily, these meticulously prepared lists, which make perfect sense to us, often appear to researchers as virtually random orderings of sets of files whose arrangement bears only a casual relationship to the information actually in the collections. As Lytle recently pointed out, "The user is expected to conform to the eccentricities of the [provenance] method . . . , in general the user must understand the system—almost to the point of becoming an archivist—to retrieve archives effectively."[35] This position is not tenable in terms of contemporary research, and our basic finding aids seem as antiquated as the old (and now discarded) calendars of state papers.

Some of our problems with arrangement and description are theoretical; others result from the gap between theory and practice. Archivists fought long and hard to establish the principle of provenance, which holds that the archives of a given office or creator should be kept intact and separate from those of other offices or record creators. Provenance has great value as a practical organizing principle. It is probably the most efficient solution to the problem of

[32] For example, see the descriptions of the IBM 6670 Information Distributor, and the school records on microfiche, in "Technical Notes," *American Archivist* 42 (October 1979): 497–500. Of course, information science and records management literature is filled with technological accounts far too numerous to cite here.

[33] Richard C. Berner, "Arrangement and Description: Some Historical Observations," *American Archivist* 41 (April 1978): 179.

[34] Richard H. Lytle, "Intellectual Access to Archives: I. Provenance and Content Indexing Methods of Subject Retrieval," *American Archivist* 43 (Winter 1980): 71.

[35] Ibid., p. 72.

physical arrangement posed by the records of massive bureaucracies both public and private. However, in the context of present research and technology, its limitations are apparent. Provenance should be understood more as a technique than as the intellectual basis of a profession. The point is not to abandon it, but to go beyond it. Provenance is based on administrative segregation, and is often quickly ascertained. But modern political, social, and economic institutions are so amorphous, transitory, overlapping, and interrelated that its implementation is of limited assistance to most users. Provenance functions at such an elevated and abstract level that it provides us with little practical guidance in the key area of subject access. In fact, there is probably an inverse ratio between the application of provenance and the interests of researchers, bureaucratic as well as scholarly. For, below the high administrative level at which provenance is most purely applied, the user finds a bewildering hierarchy of subgroups, series, and subseries, established on the bases of different filing systems, subject to the vagaries of administrative reorganizations, and ordered, within larger record groups and collections, in a manner that often appears to be illogical.

Aside from provenance, our major operating principle is customarily to retain the original filing order established by the creator of the records, in the possibly misplaced faith that filing order reveals some important information in itself. Once again, we find a valid practical technique, best justified by the drawbacks of the various alternatives, providing limited help to anyone doing non-biographical or non-narrative research. The system does little to elucidate the contents of the most common series, such as correspondence, reports, minutes, and memoranda. As archivists, we are all aware of the scorn expressed for the crypto-librarians who in the nineteenth century cataloged and classified historical records as if they were books. We may wonder whether a hundred years from now our successors will have the same regard for crypto-record managers of the twentieth century who held that such records had to be arranged and described as if they were still in actively used file drawers.

The reaction might be appropriate if we persist in traditional practices despite current technology, research trends, and the changing nature of modern records. We should think of processing now, first and foremost, as a means toward what is called "information retrieval." In this perspective, arrangement is considerably less important than description, particularly below the basic record group/collection level. To maintain, first, that we can really reconstruct the organic workings of a modern organization through a physical arrangement of its records, and, second, that researchers are interested in such a reconstruction, seems like a justification after the fact. Using relatively primitive and inexpensive automated techniques, we can arrange materials in detail intellectually without arranging them in comparable detail physically. Folder listings can be manipulated to produce traditional inventories or subject listings without regard to any original order. In this sense, the cliché is true: technology has freed us from much of the drudgery of the past. But we have been slow to make use of the opportunity. We can and should concentrate now on revealing the information in our holdings, regardless of arrangement or hierarchical level, and on bringing together information on the same subject from different collections and record groups. Our accepted procedures divide the world up by provenance and filing system, while research cuts straight across the lines we so carefully establish. It should be possible for us to retain the general divisions mandated by provenance, put less emphasis on lower levels of physical arrangement, and recognize that our major responsibility is to provide information.

The standard solution to the problem of information retrieval in archives and manuscripts is to utilize some integrative system that avoids the apparatus of control levels and inventories to identify "the totality of individual documents that are rel-

evant to a particular inquiry."[36] Card catalogs are one traditional approach, but the computer now offers a far greater potential. The archival profession being at least a decade behind librarianship in the use of automated techniques, our options have not been foreclosed. For use in social history, and social science as well, archival computer programs should permit indexing by the widest possible variety of subject, place, and date headings through different levels of control down to the folders, and the searching of various combinations of these terms through Boolean logic, though not necessarily on-line. A nationally applicable set of such programs is required, so that information can eventually be pooled. The major automated effort to date, SPINDEX, while national in its ambitions, emphasizes list generation and physical control. Again, the legitimate interests of the National Archives may be having an unfortunate effect on the profession as a whole.

A useful contrast to SPINDEX is the ARCHON system at the Baltimore Regional Institutional Studies Center (BRISC).[37] ARCHON is a program package that treats the whole repository as one set of records to be indexed at the file unit level without much regard for provenance. A controlled vocabulary has been developed to facilitate consistency of description and on-line searching. The ARCHON system has the usual problems of any new system, and its cost effectiveness is an issue for debate. But it must be said that the staff at BRISC noted the way in which social-science research is actually done, reviewed their interrelated manuscript collections, and acted accordingly.

A less drastic way of adapting to social history involves user relations rather than internal finding aids. Repositories that cannot, for practical reasons, contemplate switching to automation—and their name is legion—can instead develop subject-oriented finding aids. The usual hierarchy envisions guides as summaries of inventories. It may be more useful to prepare guides describing information rather than collections, cutting across internal boundaries and addressing specific issues such as education, the family, work, or immigrant life.

The same principle operates on the national level. Comparability is perhaps the cardinal virtue, in social history, and explains much of the attraction of quantifiable data. Archivists and manuscripts curators could disabuse researchers of the notion that our resources are idiosyncratic and antiquarian by publishing guides to subjects on a national level. For example, there are urban history repositories in more than a dozen cities now, and many more repositories with important metropolitan records. It should be a fairly simple matter to develop literature on fields like housing, health, and planning in the nation's largest cities. Such basic tools would be invaluable to urban historians and social scientists, and might give them an entirely new perspective on archives. An outstanding recent example of such work is the compilation, *Women's History Sources,* produced with the support of the University of Minnesota and the National Endowment for the Humanities.[38]

There are other ways we can reach out to modern scholars. If we think of archives and historical societies as research centers, we can easily appropriate some of the proven techniques. Subsidized research on American history is as valid as subsidized research in any other field, and archivists should develop programs of supported research based on materials in their repositories. A recent publication of the National Endowment for the Humanities was di-

[36] Adele Newberger and Paul Rosenberg, "Automation and Access," *Drexel Library Quarterly* 13 (October 1977): 48.

[37] Ibid., pp. 45–59.

[38] Andrea Hinding, ed., *Women's History Sources: A Guide to Archives and Manuscript Collections in the United States* (New York: R. R. Bowker Co., 1980).

rected specifically at encouraging research in American social history, and makes clear the opportunities for funding.[39] Enlightened archival policies on access and reference are helpful, but essentially passive. Positive outreach programs are still found in only a small minority of institutions, as a 1976 SAA survey demonstrated.[40] Given the traditional reputation of musty antiquarianism that still clings to our profession, and the wide variety of information sources now available, it is not enough simply to open the door to scholars. They have to be attracted through relevant publications, sponsored conferences, community outreach, and supported research which will involve the archivist actively in the documentation of American social history.

This article rests on the assumption that archival practices and principles are not immutable. They are instead the product of the understanding of historical research prevalent at the time they were formulated. Because that understanding has changed, as society and technology have changed, it is now time to reevaluate the conventional wisdom of our profession, discarding what has become outmoded, reordering priorities, and retaining what remains useful.

Neither archivists nor historians are known for rapidly changing their long accepted practices. Most archivists, and most historians, are not now involved with social history. But it is fair to say that the direction of creative change in the past twenty years has been strongly toward the kind of work reviewed here. In an article on "Social History as Lived and Written," James Henretta wrote that "the ultimate test of a historical method must be its capacity to depict the experiences of all members of the culture and to comprehend the ability of all individuals in the culture to make their own history." He advocated a social history that would integrate quantitative, theoretical, and narrative modes of presentation.[41] By insisting on the need to ground social history in the study of real actors, as well as the context in which they acted, Henretta reflected the current reassessment of qualitative evidence. Written and printed sources are not used merely to interpret or supplement quantitative data, but are central to the study of values, emotions, and behavior. As archivists, we should encourage and participate in this evolution and, in turn, employ the perspectives of social history in reviewing our own profession.

[39] *The National Endowment for the Humanities and American Social History* (Washington: National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities, 1979).

[40] Ann E. Pederson, "Archival Outreach: SAA's 1976 Survey," *American Archivist* 41 (April 1978): 156, 157.

[41] James Henretta, "Social History as Lived and Written," *American Historical Review* 84 (December 1979): 1314, 1319–22.

FREDRIC M. MILLER is curator of the Urban Archives Center, Temple University Libraries. His article grew out of papers presented at SAA conferences in 1975 and 1979.