

The Burke–Cappon Debate: Some Further Criticisms and Considerations for Archival Theory

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Abstract: In two recent *American Archivist* articles, Frank G. Burke and Lester J. Cappon explored the notion of archival theory and produced a fundamental disagreement over the nature and role of theory in the archival field. This article further examines the possibilities of archival theory within the context of that debate. Three theoretical positions emerge from this discussion. The first is archival theory as universal laws or models, based on the study of archives in the context of other social institutions, as propounded by Burke. The second theoretical position discussed is archival theory analyzed in its historical development, with emphasis on the intellectual traditions which directed the formation of theory. The final theoretical position discussed is that of Cappon, who rejected both of the above approaches to archival theory.

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Introduction

THE RECENT DEBATE between Frank G. Burke and Lester J. Cappon in the pages of the *American Archivist* serves as the starting point for this discussion of archival theory.¹ It would be impossible to address all of the points in Burke's sweeping, impressionistic study in the confines of this article, let alone Cappon's many objections to Burke's statements. This article, therefore, will be limited to three specific issues which emerge from the Burke-Cappon debate: (1) The place of universal laws and models in archival theory, and the possibility of finding these laws in existing social science theory; (2) The possibility of archival theory derived from historical analysis of the intellectual milieu within which theories arose; (3) The future, or lack thereof, of archival theory as it is currently understood—common sense principles verified by usage and tradition. Consistent with Burke's example, this discussion is intended primarily as an exposition of possible lines of development rather than as a dogmatic formula for future archival theory.

Some Observations on Universal Laws, Social Science, and Archival Theory

As Frank Burke correctly argues, in order for archivists to pursue "archival theory, they must first be willing to define that concept." Burke proceeds to do so. He discards the old notion of theory derived from Webster: "A belief, policy, or procedure proposed or fol-

lowed as the basis for action."² In so doing, he implicitly contradicts Lester Cappon's statement that "theory embraces principles."³

In place of this definition of theory, Burke proposes a sweeping new vision. He implores the archivist to "consider theory as the development of universal laws . . . applicable on all occasions, regardless of time or place." Moreover, these laws are not to be formulated by the mere "piling up of empirical evidence" as are the current archival theories, but rather they must be reached "abstractly."⁴ This, of course, contradicts the actual development of archival theory as we now know it. Cappon affirmed that "overarching archival principles emerged empirically, and from them specific rules have been shaped and modified for administering the records."⁵ Thus, not only do these two writers disagree on the definition of theory, but they also disagree upon the way in which theory is formulated.

Perhaps the most fundamental weakness in Burke's exposition is his insistence on a division between theories involving laws and empirical procedures.⁶ Clearly the advent of modern scientific thought was brought about by the transcendence of experimentation over abstract logic as a basis for theory formulation and verification. Empirical observation is the root of the discovery of natural laws, and the same is true of theory developed in the social sciences.

The problem is further illustrated by Burke's objection to empirical studies as "limited in their applications to certain

¹Frank G. Burke, "The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States," *American Archivist* 44 (Winter 1981): 40-46; Lester J. Cappon, "What, Then, Is There to Theorize About?," *American Archivist* 45 (Winter 1982): 19-25.

²Burke, "The Future Course of Archival Theory," 40.

³Cappon, "What, Then, Is There to Theorize About?," 21.

⁴Burke, "The Future Course of Archival Theory," 40.

⁵Cappon, "What, Then, Is There to Theorize About?," 21.

⁶Burke, "The Future Course of Archival Theory," 40.

types of records in certain types of institutions.”⁷ The mistake is not that the studies are empirical but that they are focused on types. Laws are not formulated by grouping types but by correlating operative conditions within a process. In other words, we may observe water’s transition from a solid state to a liquid state, yet we can only understand this process by correlating measurable conditions such as temperature and volume.⁸

This reveals another misconception about general laws found in the Burke article. Universal laws are not universal in that they explain everything, but rather in that they state that under conditions X and Y, Z will occur. For instance, some observable conditions, such as the color of water, may not even be operative in the process to be explained. In summary, empirical evidence is used to formulate general laws, but such laws are based on operative conditions, not event types.

What, then, does this have to do with archival theory? First, it shows that law-like theorizing will not emerge from the archives. The archives is a specific type of institution. The level of theory that Burke advocates will not emerge from the study of archival practices and principles, as he himself instinctively realizes. If it does emerge, it will do so as the empirical study of the archives in the general framework of human institutions. Theory of this sort will more likely be borrowed from one of the social sciences. Although he makes several errors getting there, Burke does suggest that this is the case.

One place that archivists have already looked for theoretical support is the library science field. What archivists have found is that library scientists themselves have gone to the social sciences in search of theoretical frameworks. To illustrate this, one need only peruse the basic reader used in many library schools, the *Reader in Library and Information Services* edited by Michael M. Reynolds and Evelyn H. Daniel. In the introduction the editors state: “The study of library and information services can be approached in as many ways as there are conceptual frameworks capable of acting to organize and explain the phenomena and behavior associated with libraries. In this way it is not unlike other service oriented fields such as medicine, social work and teaching, which depend heavily on the work done in particular disciplines (psychology, engineering, the social sciences) to organize complexity for intelligent choice.”⁹

The dominant theoretical model used in library science is open systems theory, propounded in the *Reader* by two social psychologists, Daniel Katz and Robert L. Kahn. Their systems theory does not apply merely to libraries, but to “the study of organizations . . . which analytically examines the inputs, the outputs and the transformation processes that take place within each social unit.”¹⁰ In actuality, this is not library theory, but rather it is a theory of social organization.

The same systems theory was recently applied to archives by Richard H. Lytle when he described the method and results of his investigation into subject retrieval

⁷Ibid.

⁸I am indebted on this point to Maurice Mandelbaum’s chapter, “The Problem of ‘Covering Laws’ ” in Patrick Gardiner, ed., *The Philosophy of History*, Oxford Readings in Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 51–65.

⁹Michael M. Reynolds and Evelyn H. Daniel, eds., *Reader in Library and Information Services* (Englewood, Colorado: Microcard Editions Books, 1974), xv.

¹⁰Ibid., 3–4.

methods.¹¹ At the root of this analysis was systems theory. Although Lytle does define an archives system, the theoretical systems mode of analysis could have been used as easily in a library, travel bureau, or any other social organization with input and output.

Some caveats are now in order. While I maintain that any future theories applicable to archives which are based on universal laws will not be strictly archival, the ability of social scientists to reach such laws is still in doubt. Like the philosopher Patrick Gardiner, I have often asked myself "is modern psychology a science, or is it just common sense dressed up in an impressive sounding jargon?"¹² Answering this question means defining science and what type of theory is scientific. While some philosophers maintain that social science, and even historical explanation, follows a covering law model, others would not see laws as a prerequisite for scientific explanation.¹³ Even beyond theoretical considerations, many methodological problems exist. The quantification of human factors is one thorny issue. Likewise, experimental models are difficult to construct in the real world. Unlike in the laboratory, unwanted conditions cannot simply be eliminated from the environment. Without such controls, conditions and causes are difficult to ascribe.

The Historiographical Basis of Current Archival Theory

Lester Cappon made clear his view of social science theory. He railed against the "information specialist" of little learning and the sociologist pursuing his studies draped in horrendous terminology.¹⁴ Specifically, he rejected the views of Robert Berkhofer, which Burke presents in his article. Berkhofer contends, according to Burke, that "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."¹⁵ Burke uses this relativistic approach to question the ability of archivists to objectively produce acquisition and retention policies without being bound by "the theoretical conceptions present in today's society."¹⁶ Burke here proposes the possibility of a theory radically different from his earlier call for universal laws. Rather than laws "applicable on all occasions, regardless of time or place," Berkhofer assumes a theory that is relative and culture bound.

Although Cappon admitted that "by and large, the archivist is at heart an historian,"¹⁷ he denied any act of interpretation on the part of archivists. This would fly in the face of Jenkinson's dictum that "archives were not drawn up in

¹¹Richard H. Lytle, "Intellectual Access to Archives: I. Provenance and Content Indexing Methods of Subject Retrieval," *American Archivist* 43 (Winter 1980): 64-75; "Intellectual Access to Archives: II. Report of an Experiment Comparing Provenance and Content Indexing Methods of Subject Retrieval," *American Archivist* 43 (Spring 1980): 191-208.

¹²Patrick Gardiner, *The Nature of Historical Explanation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 5.

¹³For example, see the various viewpoints on laws and explanation elucidated in Gardiner, ed., *The Philosophy of History*.

¹⁴Cappon, "What, Then, Is There to Theorize About?," 24.

¹⁵Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *A Behavioral Approach to Historical Analysis* (New York: The Free Press, 1969), 24-25, quoted in Burke, "The Future Course of Archival Theory," 43.

¹⁶Burke, "The Future Course of Archival Theory," 43.

¹⁷Cappon, "What, Then, Is There to Theorize About?," 21.

the interest of or for the information of Posterity."¹⁸ From the fact that archivists preserve for administrative rather than historical purposes, archives derive "two common qualities of extraordinary importance: impartiality and authenticity."¹⁹ Cappon concluded that Burke had been "lured . . . into theory of history, beyond the archivist's domain."²⁰

If Berkhofer's assumptions are correct, then archival history should reveal a relationship between the intellectual biases of archivists and archival theory. Indeed, it can be shown that European archival theory, which is generally accepted as the basis for American practice, was in part a product of intellectual, and specifically historiographical, theoretical frameworks. Moreover, contrary to Cappon's ideal, European archivists quite consciously arranged and described archives for the purpose of historical research.

Richard C. Berner traces the development of the European legacy from the French concept of *respect des fonds* through the Prussian system and the formulation of the *Registraturprinzip*. The famous Dutch archives manual of Muller, Feith, and Fruin is credited with codifying the Prussian system. Berner then documents the intellectual legacy of European thought on the American archival scene. This legacy, of course, was largely based on the concepts of provenance and original order.²¹ Although Berner notes the wide use of subject

classification in the Archives Nationales, he sees the idea of *respect des fonds* as the most important concept in the French system.²² While this is reasonable in the context of a treatment of the European archival legacy in America, it implies a great deal more homogeneity than was actually present in European archival developments. The French and German systems were rooted in two very different intellectual milieus, and this is manifest when the two systems are compared.

Attention has usually been focused on the concept of *respect des fonds* because it fits the view of a pan-European development towards provenance. Yet, as Adolf Brenneke makes clear in his account of European archives history, the *fonds* were instituted primarily as a practical measure, and they did not change the practice of subject classification within *fonds* that Brenneke saw as a natural extension of the rational spirit of the French Revolution.²³ The *fonds* in the Archives Nationales' 1841 schedules for the period after 1800 were not, in fact, organic but rather were subject classifications.²⁴ Brenneke concluded that the program of 1841 was, in spite of the concept of *respect des fonds*, not historical and organic but mechanical.²⁵ Ernst Posner also recognized the problem of artificial classification schemes in the Archives Nationales, especially noting the idea of *classement* in the French archival world.²⁶

¹⁸Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, 2nd ed. rev. (London: Percy Lund, Humphries & Co., Ltd., 1966), 5-6, quoted in Cappon, "What, Then, Is There to Theorize About?," 22.

¹⁹Cappon, "What, Then, Is There to Theorize About?," 22.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 23.

²¹Richard C. Berner, *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States: A Historical Analysis* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1983), 2-4.

²²*Ibid.*, 2-3.

²³Adolf Brenneke, *Archivkunde: Ein Beitrag zur Theorie und Geschichte des Europäischen Archivwesens* (Leipzig: Koehler & Amelang, 1953), 62.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 63.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 65.

²⁶Ernst Posner, "Some Aspects of Archival Development since the French Revolution," in *Archives and the Public Interest: Selected Essays*, ed. Ken Munden, with an Introduction by Paul Lewinson (Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1967), 31.

The usual reasons given for the French devotion to subject classification seem odd in light of Brenneke's insistence that the French system was not historical. Muller, Feith, and Fruin claimed that "in the arrangement of French archival depositories, attention has been paid above all to the interests of historical research."²⁷ Posner concurred that "the needs of scholarly investigation and research work were held. . . preponderantly important," and also noted the library training of many French archivists.²⁸ This difference in perception can be explained by the historiographical biases inherent in the French and German systems.

German archival theory in the late nineteenth century was influenced by the development of historicism, a historiographical viewpoint from which French archival practice would certainly seem unhistorical. Georg Iggers wrote that "what distinguished this new outlook [historicism] from major Enlightenment patterns of thought was its rejection of a mechanistic world view."²⁹ The rational, universal conception of culture embedded in Enlightenment thought was attacked by the "German reaction. . . especially the doctrine of natural law."³⁰ Historicism was informed by the works of Johann Gottfried von Herder and his organic and nationalistic view of historical growth.³¹ From the viewpoint of historicism, the stuff of history could not be mechanically and rationally broken into universal categories to exemplify some static in-

tellectual order. Whereas in Montesquieu and Voltaire, cosmopolitan and socio-cultural interests were present, for later historicists such as Johann Gustav Droysen and Heinrich von Sybel "all values and rights were of historic and national origin," and the development of the state as an organic unity was pre-eminent.³²

The historicists rejected not only Enlightenment rationalism, but also the nineteenth-century positivism of the historian Henry Thomas Buckle who sought to graft the methods of natural science to the study of human institutions and history. Iggers shows that although Droysen might have agreed with Buckle that history was a "meaningful, lawful, and progressive process," Droysen still maintained the "inapplicability of the natural sciences to historical study."³³ Sybel also "emphasized the difference in method between history and the natural sciences," but was still "convinced of the 'possibility of certain knowledge' in history, because all men are 'human beings and are governed by the same laws of human nature' and every event is part of a total context."³⁴ This comment illustrates the historicist's theory of knowledge, which was based on the concept of *Verstehen*, "an intuitive act [which] does not proceed according to abstract logic."³⁵ Historical knowledge was a unique inner understanding of human actors and institutions, not from laws or theoretical models, but simply from the very insight of being human.

The historicist's philosophical leanings

²⁷Samuel Muller, J. A. Feith and R. Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, 2nd ed., trans. Arthur H. Leavitt (New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1968), 65.

²⁸Posner, "Some Aspects of Archival Development," 31.

²⁹Georg Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present*, rev. ed. (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), 33.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 30.

³¹*Ibid.*, 35.

³²*Ibid.*, 41.

³³*Ibid.*, 109.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 116.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 111.

were quite compatible with the principles of provenance and original order. Historicism emphasized the organic evolution of the state and the understanding of that development through an intuitive, inside view of human institutions as they actually existed. It follows that the records of the state, to be properly understood, should be kept as an organic unity. The archivist and historian could then correctly interpret the records by grasping the unique internal coherence of the records and the various human relationships embodied in them.

There is more than an intellectual connection, however, between the Prussian school of German historicists and the archival theory developed at the Privy State Archives in Berlin, culminating in the Regulations of 1881. German historians had a direct hand in the archives field. Posner, in his article on Max Lehmann and the origins of the principle of provenance, states that provenance “corresponded to the ‘historical thinking’ of a generation that had come to the archives from the classes of [Leopold von] Ranke, Droysen, Sybel, and other heroes of a great period of German historiography. . . . It meant the application of respect for historical growth to the sources of historical research that had come into existence in the course of historical events.”³⁶ Sybel himself was the director of the Privy State Archives when the Regulations of 1881 were promulgated.

No double practical considerations informed the European archival experience as well, but the evolution of archival theory and practice in Europe was also profoundly influenced by the changing conception of history in the nineteenth century. Yet, because archivists

still operate in the context of the European tradition of provenance, they find it difficult to view this archival theory as part of a historiographical tradition. For many archivists, archival theory is simply a set of common sense principles to govern arrangement and description. These principles are based in administrative expediency and accepted practice. Archival history is seen as a progression towards current theory, with past aberrations such as subject classification attributed to librarians and other outside forces. Unfortunately, this ignores a great deal of the European archival heritage and the distinct possibility that other methods of organizing knowledge exist. Because Lester Cappon assumed that archival theory was already fully developed in its essential aspects, he could only ask, as he did in the title of his article, “What, then, is there to theorize about?”

Conclusion

For those who wish to further explore archival theory, Frank Burke has provided a call to arms. Certainly many other strands of development in Burke’s article could be extracted and pursued—and they should be pursued. I agree with Burke that archival theory is very underdeveloped, and any attempt to further this aspect of the archival field should be encouraged.

Both of the theoretical approaches suggested by Burke and elaborated upon in this article are in need of further study. Calls for more work in archival history abound. Richard Cox has already pointed out the need for an examination of “the European precedents and influences” for American archival history.³⁷ I would only add that such a

³⁶Ernst Posner, “Max Lehmann and the Genesis of the Principle of Provenance,” in *Archives and the Public Interest: Selected Essays*, 41.

³⁷Richard J. Cox, “American Archival History: Its Development, Needs, and Opportunities,” *American Archivist* 46 (Winter 1983): 38.

study should treat the European legacy as a product of European conditions, not as a verification of current American practices. The academic background of many archivists in history should greatly aid the analysis of archival theory in the context of its historical development. Likewise, the library science training of many archivists may prompt new work on the role of theoretical models and laws in archives. Although I am skeptical of the possibility of truly universal laws in the archives field, or even in the social sciences, the example of the social sciences may aid archivists in formulating

theory. I also agree with Burke that this work is best suited to the academic environment.

As for current archival theory, it still serves as a practical guide for arrangement and description. Yet, its most cherished principles have periodically come under attack, as Frank Boles has shown in the case of original order.³⁸ In some instances, a whole system of arrangement and description based on provenance and original order has been overturned, as occurred in the Netherlands.³⁹ If the past is any indication, this level of theory will continue in a state of flux.

³⁸Frank Boles, "Disrespecting Original Order," *American Archivist* 45 (Winter 1982): 26-32.

³⁹H. Hardenberg, "The Administrative Practice Underlying the Dutch Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives," *Archives and Manuscripts* 3 (November 1968): 7.