

Archival Theory: Much Ado About Shelving

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Abstract: The field of archival theory is not as fertile as Frank Burke, Gregg Kimball, and others suggest. There are two strains to archival theory. One strain is archival but not theoretical, and deals with the practical, how-to, nitty-gritty of archival work; this is the responsibility of archival clinicians. The other is theoretical but not archival, and is concerned with historiography; this is an endeavor not for archivists as archivists but for archivists as historians. This leaves very restricted territory indeed for the archival theorist *qua* archival theorist. Moreover, the calls for developing a body of archival theory may derive less from an objective need for more archival theory than from an emotional need on the part of an archival community seeking greater professional acceptance.

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MUCH HAS CHANGED IN the archival profession since a now retired National Archives official described his career as "thirty-five years as a glorified file clerk."¹ More than ever, archivists are demanding greater recognition for their professionalism. One aspect of this campaign is an increasing preoccupation with archival theory. Theories abound in all academic disciplines: physicists devise relativistic scattering and grand unified gauge theories; linguists study parsing and syntactic theories; economists use stochastic models to build theories of income fluctuation; epistemologists debate a multitude of conflicting theories concerning knowledge and perception. Many archivists believe that there should be a similar body of closely-reasoned theory on such abstruse posers as the five levels of arrangement and the concept of evidential value.

Frank G. Burke has called for a division of archivists into "theoreticians" and "clinicians." He maintains that the former group, ensconced in academe, should spend its time developing a "new philosophy of archives" by generating "principles," "dogma," "transcendent concepts," and "paradigmatic explanations."² In seeking to accentuate the intellectual validity of archival theory, Burke and others invoke the names of such philosophical and literary lions as Georg Hegel, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Marshall McLuhan, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.³

Richard Berner even goes so far as to wax poetic in likening the persistence of a particular tradition of archival thought to "the twilight of a summer Arctic night."⁴

The field, however, may not be as fertile as Burke suggests. There are two strains to what passes as archival theory: one strain is archival but not theoretical, and deals with the practical, how-to, nitty-gritty of archival work. It involves codifying existing records control procedures and tinkering with them to develop more efficient methods; this is the responsibility of archival clinicians. The other is theoretical but not archival, and is concerned with historiography. It demands a knowledge of the historical context and value of records, and is an endeavor not for archivists as archivists but for archivists as historians, or at least as students of history. All this leaves very restricted territory indeed for the archival theorist *qua* archival theorist. Moreover, the calls for developing a body of archival theory may derive less from an objective need for more archival theory than from an emotional need for greater professional acceptance.

In the "practical" category of archival theory are many of the standard works in the profession (Muller, Feith, and Fruin; Schellenberg; Holmes), as well as more recent efforts, such as Berner's *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States*.⁵ These works set forth the procedures that archivists should observe in

¹ Author's conversation with Philip R. Ward, Sr., Judicial, Fiscal, and Social Branch, National Archives, Washington, D.C., April 1986, regarding one of Ward's former colleagues.

² Frank G. Burke, "The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States," *American Archivist* 44 (Winter 1981): 45-6.

³ Burke, "Future Course of Archival Theory," 45; Max Evans, "Authority Control: An Alternative to the Record Group Concept," *American Archivist* 49 (Summer 1986): 260; F. Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *American Archivist* 38 (January 1975): 13; Terry Cook, "From Information to Knowledge: An Intellectual Paradigm for Archives," *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984-85): 46.

⁴ Richard C. Berner, *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States: A Historical Analysis* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984), 73.

⁵ For examples, see Samuel Muller, J.A. Feith, and R. Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, trans. Arthur H. Leavitt (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1940); Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Archival Arrangement—Five Different Operations at Five Different Levels," in *A Modern Archives Reader: Basic Readings on Archival Theory and Practice*, ed. Maygene Daniels and Timothy Walch (Washington:

controlling archival and manuscript collections: categories of value, levels of arrangement, item description, collective description, classification schemes, calendaring, and so forth. At times, such studies can cover the most mind-numbing of minutiae, as they delve exhaustively into the fine points of data sheets, sorting notes, finding aids, alphabetical arrangement versus chronological arrangement, and the size and configuration of loose-leaf pages that offer an alternative to catalog cards.⁶ This certainly is theory, but only in a vocational sense, as instruction manuals or handbooks in any clerical or service occupation might be called theory.

This type of theory can be exaggerated and sometimes tends to state the obvious in unduly complicated terms. Scholarly dissections of the levels of arrangement and detailed analyses of the simple act of an archivist answering a researcher's questions about records are two examples of how writers on archivy strive to conceptualize the mundane.⁷ Further, the debates this type of theory engenders amount to little more than an exchange of suggestions concerning more effective ways to write scope notes, prepare inventories, arrange letters received, or handle bulky items. They are a far cry from the exciting dialectical gyrations Burke envisions.

At its highest level, this how-to category of archival theory gives archivists such imposing monuments as provenance, original order, the record

group concept, and *Registraturprinzip*. These concepts undoubtedly have a greater element of theory *per se* than, for example, theories of indexing because they each are based on principles that are truly abstract. Yet, ultimately, they have to do with organization, categorization, and retrieval, and hence are largely practical tools rather than the sort of cultural talismans some would assert. Even the stirring debate over authority controls versus record groups, important though it is, simply represents one more stage in the ongoing, practical process of archival tinkering and arguing over what tools to use.

According to Berner, the aim of the how-to literature should be to develop a "general system" to "serve as a theoretical model to guide practice."⁸ In reality, it consists mainly of specific formulae that address isolated problems. Berner's own writings, for instance, document his findings and developments at the University of Washington Archives. Obviously, they are suited to that particular repository, and they undoubtedly could be adopted, with revisions, by repositories of similar size or with similar holdings; but universal laws they are not.

Clearly, it is indispensable for archivists to be able to work from models and guidelines. Otherwise, they would have to reinvent the wheel with every new job. Similarly, it is essential that these guidelines be revised periodically to reflect changes in technology and to com-

National Archives, 1984), 162-80; T.R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).

⁶For examples, see Schellenberg, *Modern Archives*, 9, 55-59, 74-78; and T.R. Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), *passim*. For a review of "nuts and bolts" theory, see Harold T. Pinkett, "American Archival Theory: The State of the Art," *American Archivist* 44 (Summer 1981): 217-22.

⁷See Holmes, "Archival Arrangement," 162-80; George Chalou, "Reference," in *A Modern Archives Reader*, 257-63; and George Chalou, "Reference Service," handout distributed in National Archives training course, September 1985. In the handout, Chalou is so analytical in examining the reference function that he abstracts "records," "users," and "archives staff" out as the separate elements that make up the "point of convergence." "Point of convergence" is another way of saying "answering a question."

⁸Berner, *Archival Theory*, 75.

municate discoveries of better ways to perform various functions. Appraisal theories devised by Theodore Schellenberg and Philip Brooks, for example, cannot guide the appraiser of machine-readable records unless they are amended by Charles Dollar's specific directives on appraising automated materials.⁹

Nonetheless, this literature is oriented exclusively toward what F. Gerald Ham calls the "nuts and bolts or craft aspects"¹⁰ of the profession. Even when it explains *why* a particular mode of arrangement or appraisal is recommended, it still concentrates on methodology rather than content and thus is simply a codification of craftsmanship. It is this type of theory—about such things as the "mundane matters of arrangement and description, the techniques of microfilming or lamination, [and] the dendritical structure of organizational records"—that Burke expressly excludes from the field to be considered by the archival theoreticians. The theoreticians, he argues, should "address the larger questions. . . ."¹¹

The second strain of archival theory does address larger questions—but are they archival questions? In a way, this type of theory can be seen as applied historiography. It focuses on the content and context of records, and not on their structure or the processes of controlling them.

In "The Archival Edge," Ham decries the habit of documenting only the history of elites, and calls upon archivists to fill the gaps within the historical record.¹² Ham's article attempts to be very forward-looking, yet it is quite plainly the

product of an historiographical tradition that is already a trifle hackneyed. Nonetheless, his point is very well taken: archivists must make many decisions as professional historians, not as mere custodians. They must be attuned to historical scholarship in order to anticipate future research interests and even to counteract unhealthy historiographical trends through creative acquisitions policies. Like Ham, Burke invokes historiography in his ponderings on archival theory when he argues for an understanding of the cultural history behind any given body of records.¹³

Paradoxically, it is at this point that archival theory becomes irrelevant. Provenance, hierarchies, the five levels of arrangement, cataloging, authority controls, and even methods of implementing archival decisions based on historiographical trends become tangential at best. Knowledge of historical scholarship and of the content of particular collections become the essential components in making informed, professional decisions about appraisal, description, and reference. Reading and retaining every word ever written on archival theory or archival procedures will give the archivist no assistance whatsoever in determining the historical significance of a group of records or in handling a researcher's questions.

In fact, excessive preoccupation with the literature on purely archival matters can be a clear hindrance. A historical officer for one federal agency has been critical of the National Archives for not assigning a records appraiser who could complement professional archival credentials with an adequate knowledge

⁹See Charles M. Dollar, "Appraising Machine-Readable Records," in *A Modern Archives Reader*, 71-79.

¹⁰Ham, "Archival Edge," 7.

¹¹Burke, "Future Course of Archival Theory," 42.

¹²Ham, "Archival Edge," 5-7, 9; F. Gerald Ham, "Archival Strategies for the Post-Custodial Age," *American Archivist* 44 (Summer 1981): 207.

¹³Burke, "Future Course of Archival Theory," 42-44.

of either the agency's history, the time period during which the agency's records were produced, or the records themselves.¹⁴ A case such as this indicates that a historian with no training in archives could well make far more professional and justifiable decisions about records disposition than an archivist with an inadequate background in history or an insufficient knowledge of the records.

Similar observations can be made regarding other aspects of archival work. Preservation is, of course, an archival concern, and conservators must be fully acquainted with archival theory. Yet the professionalism the conservator must exhibit and the creativity a conservator must employ have nothing to do with archives; rather, they are rooted in chemistry, physics, and other scientific disciplines. Meanwhile, specialists in automated records use archival procedures merely to put into effect decisions based on their technical expertise. And what counts most for archivists responsible for access decisions is knowing the law.

Archival theory, then, is reduced to little more than a mode for implementing decisions that are made pursuant to historical or other knowledge. We save what is historically valuable—*there*; that is the theory. From then on the matter becomes one of studying the records and studying history and has nothing to do with the study of archivy. Archivy is post-historiography. If the arguments of Ham and Burke are valid, the implication would be that well before archivists can initiate archival operations, they must study history, keep abreast of the historical literature, and perhaps even work as professional, research historians. History-based decisions and archivally-based operations, while inextricably

linked, are inevitably separate. They are just as distinct from each other as the inspiration of the poet is distinct from the pens and paper that capture it.

Thus it is appropriate to repeat Burke's question: "What, then, is there to theorize about?"¹⁵ One aspect of archival theory is in reality clinical and specifies the frequently rote control operations that should be followed in handling collections. The other aspect of archival theory concerns the archival response to historiography and ultimately (and properly) drags the archivist out of archivy altogether and into the realm of historiography. What is left to occupy the mind of the archival theorist?

Three areas come to mind. The first is an extension of the historiographical strain of archival theory and involves the translation of historiography to archival terms. The second, and perhaps most compelling of the three, involves appraising the validity of the historiographical strain of archival theory and leads to questions concerning the reasons for the profession's existence. The third concerns the evaluation or reevaluation of the numerous bromides that are too often taken for granted in archival work. A closer look at these subjects, however, shows the territory for archival theorists eroding even further.

The first question of theory is essentially one of synthesizing history with archival needs. For example, Ham's assertions that archivists should provide a more accurate historical record require a corollary: that methods be devised for doing this. Ham's proposals are most ambitious. He says the archivist should cease being "a weathervane moved by the changing winds of historiography," and he repeats Sam Bass Warner's call for the archivist to become "a historical reporter

¹⁴Author's conversation, circa February 1986.

¹⁵Burke, "Future Course of Archival Theory," 42.

for his own time," gathering the information necessary to complete the historical record. Ham goes on to argue for specialized archives and inter-archival networks.¹⁶

While Ham wants archivists to be less subject to the "vogue of the academic marketplace," his article, written in the mid-1970s and bursting with enthusiasm for urban archives and the Eugene McCarthy Historical Project, clearly reflects the historiographical fashions of its times.¹⁷ Further, in suggesting that archivists actively participate as "reporters" in the creation of the historical records, he is asking them to become photographers, economists, statisticians, and demographers, rather than archivists. But even allowing these statements of Ham to stand, the implications have to do with control procedures rather than with archival theory. The creative acquisitions policies, archives networks, and specialized archives Ham trumpets may be on a far grander scale than procedures for labeling or methods of indexing, but they are still the nuts and bolts Ham thinks he is avoiding. Taking Ham's content-based ideas and converting them to archivy means searching for more efficient practices.

Like Ham, Burke grapples with the problem of merging history with archivy. He is sensitive to the debates within the historical profession concerning subjectivity and relativism. He contends that archival theorists might attempt to devise theories that would help the profession "rise above [its] own social and intellec-

tual environment" to furnish a more nearly pristine truth to tomorrow's historians.¹⁸ Lester Cappon accuses Burke of confounding archival truth with historical truth and goes on to praise the "impartiality and authenticity" of records.¹⁹ Gregg Kimball supports Burke's position by showing how even the supposedly impartial archival theories upon which Cappon based his arguments concerning archival truth were themselves colored by their intellectual milieus.²⁰

The arguments of all three have merit, but in a larger sense, Burke, Cappon, and Kimball are struggling over a moot point. Of course archival truth is tainted by the same temporal, cultural influences that taint historical truth; every idea is shaped by its time, no matter how sincerely its originator strives for objectivity. It is not reasonable to expect that the archival community can formulate theories to enable it to transcend its cultural moorings. For that matter, to attempt to do so risks distorting the truth even more. Future historians will be able to gauge the degree of bias of today's archivists through their knowledge of today's culture. If archivists try too hard to enshrine their idea of objective truth, they will not only continue to be trapped by their cultural environment, they will also deprive tomorrow's historians of a way of understanding their biases. The best archivists can do is keep abreast of current historical scholarship and make the most reasoned judgments they can on a case-by-case basis. To attempt to create a

¹⁶Ham, "Archival Edge," 7-12; Ham, "Archival Strategies," 207, 211-12.

¹⁷Ham, "Archival Edge," 8, 10, 11. Although not uncritical of the McCarthy Project and urban archives, Ham seems to advocate the development of specialized archives when complemented by archives networks. Ham's choice of such examples indicates a familiarity with contemporary historiographical trends without showing the prescience he seems to urge archivists to display.

¹⁸Burke, "Future Course of Archival Theory," 43.

¹⁹Lester J. Cappon, "What, Then, Is There To Theorize About?" *American Archivist* 45 (Winter 1982): 23-25; Gregg D. Kimball, "The Burke-Cappon Debate: Some Further Criticisms and Considerations for Archival Theory," *American Archivist* 48 (Fall 1985): 372-73.

²⁰Kimball, "Burke-Cappon Debate," 372-75.

theory of timeless archives, if you will, would be as futile as it would be counter-productive.

More fundamental would be to question whether history should be tied into archivy at all. The pleas of Ham and Burke represent a radical theoretical departure, which runs counter to the theories of Hillary Jenkinson that the archivist is not a historian and that an archivist's duty is not to history but to "his Archives."²¹ In his response to Burke, Cappon echoes Jenkinson by warning that "an alliance of archives with history" would threaten the independence of the archival discipline.²²

This is genuinely a theoretical dispute of great magnitude. It raises the most basic and far-reaching questions about who archivists are and why archival institutions exist, and was only recently the subject of an entertaining series of articles in *Archivaria*.²³ In a sense, however, the archival theorist who confronts this dilemma gets caught between Scylla and Charibdis. If the archival theorist comes down on the side of the Jenkinson school, or some variation thereof, then the intellectual venue immediately shifts to the how-to category of theory and a preoccupation with technique.²⁴ If the theorist concludes in favor of Ham and Burke, then historiography takes over. In other words, even this vital question of archival theory offers limited opportunity for debate. With slight variations, the argument probably will live

forever. But few new points will be made, and once any theorist is satisfied with any kind of conclusion, the aspect of archival theory disappears; the question then becomes one of either historiography or procedures.

All of this leaves only a few isolated questions to be dealt with under the rubric of theory. These concern assumptions archivists make in doing their work. Included would be assumptions such as the following: the older a record is the higher its retention value; fat files have greater importance than slender ones; provenance is a superior method of retrieval to content indexing; central office files are more important than field office files; records of the director's office are more important than those of the assistant director; and so forth.²⁵

It is not harmful and is in some respects pleasant for archivists to chat about such things and even to test them in practice. But I fail to see the slightest need for archives academicians to develop dogma on these points with the precision and commitment that, say, Marx and Engels wrote *Das Kapital*. It does not take a genius to divine the reasons behind such assumptions nor to figure out their drawbacks. It is obvious why older documents would usually have greater informational value, but it is just as obvious that in many cases older documents would have value only as artifacts. The arguments favoring the fat file theory are not at all elusive, but

²¹Cappon, "What, Then, Is There To Theorize About?" 23.

²²Ibid., 25.

²³Cook, "From Information to Knowledge," 28-49; Hugh Taylor, "Information Ecology and the Archives of the 1980s," *Archivaria* 18 (Summer 1984): 25-37; George Bolotenko, "Archivists and Historians: Keepers of the Well," *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983): 5-25; Patrick A. Dunae et al., "Special Feature: The Debate Over History and Archives," *Archivaria* 17 (Winter 1983-84): 286-308.

²⁴For an example of a preoccupation with technology over content, see Bob Taylor-Vaisey, "Archivist-Historians Ignore Information Revolution," *Archivaria* 17 (Winter 1983-84): 305-08.

²⁵Provenance versus content indexing is considered, complete with intricate flow charts almost as impressive as Linus Pauling's early representations of protein molecules, in Richard H. Lytle, "Intellectual Access to Archives," *American Archivist* 43 (Winter 1980 and Spring 1980): 64-75, 191-206. Questions concerning organizational theory and the decision-making process in corporate bodies are raised in Burke, "Future Course of Archival Theory," 43.

neither is the fact that fat files are often fat with trivia.

It is appropriate for archivists to work from sets of assumptions, and it is also appropriate for archivists to question those assumptions. But it seems likely that such questions can be asked and competently answered by any archivist, without the intervention of full-time theorists. Not only are the questions easy enough that they do not require Burke's seminarian approach, but they are also of such a nature that no dogmatic answers would suffice. In some cases, the fat file theory would be appropriate; in other cases it would not. Provenance may be a superior method in general, but some repositories may be perfectly justified in adopting content indexing, depending on the volume and nature of their holdings and the frequency of reference requests. It may be beneficial for archivists to be acquainted with sociological theories relating to organizations, but the power relationships within an organization and the records produced by an organization vary such that theory can never substitute for a firm knowledge of the organization and its records. The ultimate question in any case would not be one of archival theory, but one of the records, their content, their significance, and their home repository.

Just as many would contend that theology says more about society and psychology than it says about divinity, archival theory may say more about archivists than about archival work. Except for those who work in the larger and exclusively archival institutions, archivists are often isolated from one another and surrounded by corporate or government professionals who tend to look upon them as file clerks. In some institutions, as procedures become more rigid and

production schedules more demanding, archivists may find their work reduced to the level of a technician's. In addition, as the importance of automated records increases, archivists must defer more and more to computer specialists in matters of preservation, appraisal, and records management.²⁶ Other professionals also infringe upon archivists' domain and sometimes conflict with their mission: public relations specialists, educators, librarians, and curators, for example. Finally, with such a high percentage of female archivists, the profession as a whole may be subject to the sort of discrimination and condescension male managers have long directed at women in professional fields. It is easy to understand why archivists might feel shunted to the sidelines, and elbowed aside even there.

Given such a disturbing state of affairs, it is not surprising that some groups in the profession see certification as a procedure that will bring archivists greater recognition, higher status, better pay, and more independence. By the same token, development of archival theory may seem attractive as another avenue toward the same goals. It lends academic trappings to the profession, thereby increasing its respectability.

A better prescription, perhaps, would put less emphasis on appearances and shift attention back to basic issues. Burke's question could be rephrased to ask, "What, then, is there for archivists to *think* about?" The answer is that there is plenty to think about, but that little of it has to do with theory. The literature on craft or methodological aspects of archivy, while often dry and technical, can be intellectually demanding and is always essential. Not to be confused with grand, overarching theories, the craft literature

²⁶Jerome M. Clubb, "Archival Implications of Technological and Social Change," in *Archivists and Machine-Readable Records*, ed. Carolyn L. Geda, Erik W. Austin, and Francis X. Blouin, Jr. (Ann Arbor: 1980), 238-39.

primarily encompasses ad hoc solutions developed by clinicians to meet immediate problems and can only offer guidance and suggestions to other clinicians facing similar tasks. Probably a very small percentage of that literature would be universally valuable, but all of it can find an audience with some portion of the profession. The unending stream of articles and manuals on nuts and bolts attests to the need to develop, implement, and broadcast better procedures. There is also an ethics of archivy—again, not laws or first principles, but gentle observations, such as Jenkinson's "Reflections of an Archivist," that help members of the profession to meditate about their calling. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is the information the records contain, the history and historiography that form the intellectual context for that information, and the nature of the particular organizations and individuals that produced the records. It is only by becoming subject matter specialists in these areas that archivists truly become something more than file clerks and can make reasoned judgments about collecting, maintaining, and servicing records. With so much to work on, high-falutin' archival theory seems a rather superfluous and unpromising diversion.

Cappon is correct in resisting overly ambitious and quasi-historiographical theorizing about archival procedures. But he errs in trying to maintain the rigid delineation between archivist and historian, and in seeming to restrict archivists to the straight and narrow as defined by the likes of Galbraith, Leland, and others in their timeworn manuals and musings. Burke and Ham make a lot of

sense in pleading for archivists to open their minds and deepen their thoughts. But Burke overestimates the potential of pure archivy as a worthwhile academic pursuit and invites skepticism through his tendency to associate squabbles over archival issues with the great thoughts of western civilization. And Ham invites even greater skepticism with his grandiose schemes to send archivists out into the field to capture the information that he thinks nobody else is clever enough to record.

Above all, it should be remembered that archivy *per se* is a fairly straightforward, down to earth service occupation; it is not a liberal science, and it is not to be confused with the cultural and historical treasures held by archival repositories. The knowledge that archivists must have to be effective can easily be summarized: they need to know procedures and technology; they need to know the ethics of the profession and what is expected of them; they need to know history; and they especially need to know their records. Everything else is either unnecessary or will fall into place well enough without the mediation of a priesthood of theorists.

Great things are happening in the world of ideas. Poems are being written, symphonies composed, diseases mastered, historical eras probed, and economic dilemmas analyzed. In the midst of all this, it is extreme intellectual silliness to boggle oneself with such preposterous phantoms as archival paradigms, symbiotic links of medium and message, philosophy of mylar, and other prostheses that some archivists would thrust forward as credentials to sit at the grown-ups' table.