Perspectives

SCOTT CLINE, editor

Archival Theory: Myth or Banality?

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Abstract: Archival theory too often is trivial, overwrought, unnecessary, or irrelevant. While theory in other disciplines can produce new insights and stimulate intellectual progress, theory in archives cannot play an analogous role and cannot advance the archival profession. It tends to oversimplify that which is complicated and to overcomplicate that which is simple. Much archival theory is public relations Babbitry that threatens to overstratify the profession.

About the author: John W. Roberts is the archivist of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, Washington, DC. He was asked to prepare this paper for the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists in Atlanta, Georgia in August 1988, in order to expand on his 1987 American Archivist *article, "Archival Theory: Much Ado About Shelving."*

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, ABC newsman Ted Koppel spoke to journalism students at the University of Maryland. He told them not to waste their time studying journalism. He recommended that they study sociology, or political science, or some other academic subject that would enhance their understanding of the issues on which they would report. Journalists certainly must understand editor's symbols, know how alliteration can make for snappier headlines, and be familiar with the history of their field. But Koppel was saying that the key to success in journalism is a knowledge of substance, that journalism as an academic discipline does not deal with substance but only technique, and that the technique itself does not merit a great deal of study because journalism is a trade that can be learned on the job.[1]

Archival work is in much the same situation. Archivists must be well-versed in the technical components of their tasks, must appreciate the ethics of their profession, and must know something of the history of their field. But archival functions are a process—nothing more. To concentrate too deeply on the process as if it had academic worth or were the essential element in successful archival work trivializes the profession, and threatens to make it arcane and narcissistic. In particular, archival theory should be questioned as a mode for increasing our understanding of creating, collecting, and maintaining records. Archival theory is largely irrelevant to archival work, promotes an undesirable stratification within the profession, and is intellectually frivolous.

Archival theory does two things that are profoundly threatening to clarity of thought: it overcomplicates that which is simple, and it oversimplifies that which is complicated. It overcomplicates by elevating to the level of philosophy the easily mastered procedures of archival work, breaking them down into their most minute components and analyzing them far beyond a point of edification. It oversimplifies by reducing to a string of formulas, flow charts, and dicta the multi-faceted demands of learning a topic, a record group, and researcher needs, and integrating that knowledge with a knowledge of other topics, record groups, and a researcher's needs.

Some of this theory is incredibly banal, as it ponders the mysteries of finding aids and cataloging units, or proposes systematic, archives-by-the-numbers approaches to the sort of ordinary, everyday problems best solved by individual archivists in a pragmatic fashion. Conversely, some of this theory is extravagant and illusory, as it seeks to conjure all-encompassing value systems or grand syntheses. At its most mythical, it is presented as offering such striking and widely-applicable insights that it can dramatically influence other disciplines. But archival theory does not really answer most of the questions archivists must address, and can provide only the vaguest framework for archival endeavors.

In other disciplines, particularly the hard sciences, theory is the wellspring. The theory of quarks, for example, revolutionized physics, and plate techtonics theory transformed the study of paleontology and geology. Such theories tend to concern phenomena that cannot be observed directly or must be surmised for many years before they can be proved. Initially, quarks were suggested only by a mathematical formula, and then were extrapolated from the movements of electrons; because they could exist only while hidden inside sub-nuclear motes, they could never be isolated and "seen." In addition to being about the empirically unknowable, such theories have universal application within a discipline. If quarks existed, previous elementary particle theory would go out the window and an important step would be taken toward

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[1] "Koppel: Keeping Up With Changing Public Opinion," *Diamondback*, 9 September 1986, 1.

realizing grand unified theory. Because quarks would be everywhere, all the questions would change, all the answers would change, and all the research would change.[2]

Archival work is nothing like that, and there is not a comparable role for theory to play. There is less need for theoretical knowledge because everything about archival work, theoretically, can be known empirically. Either the director's subject files contain historically valuable information or they do not, and an archivist can ascertain that only by actually looking at the records. Further, theories have limited application to the archival endeavor. One director's subject files may contain historically valuable information, but another director's subject files may not. These instances may seem deliberately narrow, but they are examples of the only real problems that archivists must face.

Archival work is intrinsically, inescapably ad hoc. There is no big picture in archives—just an infinite number of little pictures that can be mastered only one at a time. The single thread linking them is composed of the most rudimentary, functional aspects of archival work. To strain to perceive connections that are not there or to postulate common themes that do not exist would be a distortion.

Common themes in archives are impossible because of the endless variability of subject matter. The French essayist, Simone de Beauvoir, once described human beings as those "whose essence lies in having no essence." The same should be said of archives. An archives is chameleon-like; it has no essence of its own, but assumes that of each records creator. It assumes its history, its theories, its character. Master them, and an archivist has mastered everything. Master archives and an archivist has mastered nothing. The nature of archival work changes with each job. If an archivist knows the records creator, the context in which the records creator operated, and the records themselves, then he or she has all the knowledge necessary to make sound archival decisions. If an archivist knows archival theory, he or she would not be able to use it before learning the records creator and the records, and, having accomplished that, would have no need for the theory.

The most enticing but misleading claim that is made for archival theory is that it might enable the profession to avoid the very real pitfalls of relying upon historiography for guidance in selecting materials for retention. Tragically, many historical resources have been lost because archivists were too blinded by the biases of their time to know they were missing anything. But the only way archivists can begin to transcend those biases is to become better historians and contribute to the advance of historical knowledge—because it is *only* through the advance of historical knowledge that anyone can become sensitive to gaps in the historical record created by cultural, racial, gender, or other biases in the selection process. Archival theory cannot offer shortcuts to historical, cultural, or social enlightenment. Justifiable appraisal and retention policies require the wisdom of a knowledgeable historian, not the mechanical dexterity of a well-trained archivist.[3]

In an earlier article, I suggested that there are two types of archival theory. One describes and explains archival procedures such as devising arrangement schemes, defining series, reconstructing provenance, and so

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[2]Michael Riordan, *The Hunting of the Quark: A True Story of Modern Physics* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1987), 9-12.

[3]For a thoughtful analysis of how some archivists have attempted to use insights of recent historiography to create acquisitions policies more reflective of social reality, see Elizabeth K. Lockwood, "'Imponderable Matters:' The Influence of New Trends in History on Appraisal at the National Archives," unpublished manuscript, National Archives Career Intern Development System, 31 May 1989 [accepted for publication in a forthcoming issue of the *American Archivist*].

forth. It comprises the vocational-technical literature of the profession. The second type of archival theory is concerned with the content and, more importantly, the context of records, rather than the rote processes of controlling records. By translating insights from history, sociology, and other fields into an ideology of archives, it seeks formulas to help archivists assume a more active and independent role, develop a sharper perception of what should be documented, and redefine the archival mission.[4]

Since the article came out, I have discerned a third strain of archival theory, which I call the Imperial School. Not to be confused with the writings of Charles M. Andrews and Lawrence Henry Gipson on the eighteenth-century British Empire, the Imperial School of archival theory does not propose not to study imperialism. Rather, it apparently intends to practice it, by boldly extending the frontiers of archival work into everything from theory of knowledge to industrial relations.

Even Frank Burke has described much of the "how-to" theory as unoriginal, "reportorial," and "mundane."[5] Outside of the archival community, it would hold little interest. No one would consider analyzing archival concepts or charting their historical development as one would analyze and chart the development of baroque music, existentialism, or English romantic poetry. Of course, it is true that Richard Berner has devoted an entire book to the subject.[6] But while the book is a helpful, if tedious, backdrop to archival work, the parochialism and sterility of such movements as the

manuscript tradition and the public records tradition make it unlikely that they will ever compete for space in western civilization courses.

Berner's scholarly treatment of them notwithstanding, archival concepts are not sufficiently valid as cultural expressions to be studied academically. They merely elucidate a tool or mechanism of restricted interest, limited application, and insignificant origin. Furthermore, archival concepts exist to facilitate the study of other things, not to be studied themselves. Archives serve the needs of whatever disciplines require records for study and would not exist without them. The archival field therefore has no truly independent intellectual vigor.

Moreover, current in-depth studies of how-to concepts do not produce new discoveries so much as restate old ones in increasingly and unnecessarily elaborate terms. While it is professionally useful to enunciate the various components that form the basis of archival work, scholarly investigations of them quickly reach a point of diminishing returns. Even with the introduction of new technologies, there is nothing really new under the sun in the way of how-to archival theory. Yet works on how-to theory continue to roll forth, largely to divide and subdivide, state and restate, magnify and remagnify the same old territory.

Documentation strategy and weights-and-measures appraisal theory, for instance, do not represent conceptual departures so much as amplified echoes. In "The Documentation Strategy Process: A Model and Case Study," Larry Hackman and Joan Warnow-Blewitt propose a model that would have archivists decide what is important enough to be documented, determine the nature of all available records, gauge the value of records to records creators and researchers, consider the extent to which documentation is unique, persuade records creators to improve their record-keeping practices, and publicize acquisitions. Ar-

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[4]John W. Roberts, "Archival Theory: Much Ado About Shelving," *American Archivist* 50 (Winter 1987): 66-74.

[5]Frank G. Burke, "The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States," *American Archivist* 44 (Winter 1981): 40-42.

[6]Richard C. Berner, *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States: A Historical Analysis* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983).

chivists, of course, have always tried to do these things. Thus, it may be that the most perceptive comment in the article was that used to describe a central tenet of the model: "This is not a new idea and is perhaps too obvious to require discussion." All that Hackman and Warnow-Blewitt really add is a certain religious fervor concerning the indivisibility of archives, and a structure for increased consultation in the documentation process through the use of committees.[7]

Incidentally, Hackman and Warnow-Blewitt base their model on one developed by an ad hoc committee of the American Institute of Physics.[8] A similar plan devised by a Bureau of Prisons task force led to the establishment of the Bureau's Office of Archives.[9] The fact that a group of physicists in the 1960s and a group of wardens and criminal justice professors in the 1980s, working independently of each other and without any archival training, could come up with documentation strategies so like the Hackman/Warnow-Blewitt model may be taken as a comment on the necessity of archival scholarship and education.

Besides codifying the obvious, how-to theory puts it under an electron microcope and scans for every atom. In "Exploring the Black Box," Julia Marks Young and Frank Boles attempt to capture all the complexities of the appraisal process. Where Theodore Schellenberg erected a few bare girders, Young and Boles add walls, turrets, gargoyles, and verandas, as they propose at least fifty-eight categories in three separate but interrelated modules on which to base appraisal decisions.[10]

The most difficult element of appraisal is deciding what subjects, organizations, or individuals require documentation. That decision cannot be made by having a mechanical process clank into operation. It must be based on a broad knowledge of history, current events, even philosophies; and that knowledge is ever changing, ever growing, and cannot be captured in a recipe. Once the primary decision has been made, guidelines can give structure to an archivist's evaluation of the records, but overly intricate guidelines do not really facilitate the process or materially increase understanding.

Young and Boles have done a careful and commendable job of identifying the multitude of intellectual, political, economic, technical, managerial, and even emotional factors affecting appraisal decisions. Even if nothing is left out, however, the value of trying to encompass such factors in a model is questionable.

Based upon the number of boxes in the main flow charts, their model contains fifty-eight categories. Conceivably, the model could be broken down even further; instead of fifty-eight categories there could be 158. Similarly, it could be broken down somewhat less; there could be just three categories, representing the three modules, without trying to spell everything out. Finding balance is the problem. What level of analysis is necessary? What level is helpful? What level is excessive? What level is overkill?

In fact, many appraisal decisions can be made based on only two or three of the fifty-eight categories. To complete all levels of all three modules would be superfluous. Decisions about something as obviously valuable as John Quincy Adams' diaries or as obviously worthless as Harold Stassen's laundry tickets could be made simply on

[7]Larry Hackman and Joan Warnow-Blewitt, "The Documentation Strategy Process: A Model and Case Study," *American Archivist* 50 (Winter 1987): 12-47. The quotation is from p. 46.

[8]Ibid., 17, 30-31.

[9]File on BOP Archives Advisory Board, BOP Archives, Washington, DC.

[10]Frank Boles and Julia Marks Young, "Exploring the Black Box: The Appraisal of University Admin-

istration Records," *American Archivist* 48 (Spring 1985): 121-40.

the basis of the "analysis of content" section of the "value of information" module. There would be no need to consider the remaining fifty-seven varieties. Only in the case of records of very marginal worth or institutions with very unclear acquisitions policies would it be necessary to employ the model.

What emerges is a retention philosophy that is itself retentive. The obsessiveness of composing and following Rube Goldberg contraptions that pretend to incorporate every nuance imaginable leads archivists into the sort of situation that Jane Addams called "the snare of preparation."[11] Overstructuring, overplanning, overabstracting, and overtraining does not pay off. At some point it becomes a drawback that diverts energy from actual work to the development and worship of bloodless constructs. Maybe that point comes a little bit after Schellenberg's two categories, but it probably comes well before Boles and Young's fifty-eight.

The problem lies in trying to mechanize processes that cannot be mechanized and in trying to put activities on a scientific basis that are not scientific. No model, no matter how complete, can measure researcher need or content value and determine archival permanence with the precision that a spectrograph can measure light waves and determine chemical composition. The process is scientifically flawed, because the information being plugged into the framework will always represent subjective judgment and because the model can be truncated without invalidating the decision. The appraisal process, aided by a few suggestions of what to consider, rather than oppressed by theorists' ideas of archival truth, must be created anew each time it is performed. Different appraisers, different records, different subjects, and different repositories

will produce ever-changing combinations of information sources, thought processes, and value systems. Flawless application of a pseudo-scientific model would not produce a good records appraisal any more than flawless penmanship would produce a good novel.

Knitting one's brow over such issues illustrates the essential fallacy of all archival scholarship: the misapprehension that defining the process means finding the key. In a sense, it is unnecessary to understand the process, because the process is only a matter of style or technique. Even if there were a true method for doing things, it would be a trivial truth. Come up with the most perfect appraisal theory possible and it will not make much difference. Apply the Young/Boles model to past appraisals of State Department records and you will not find that many mistakes were made using inadequate models; no matter what model had been applied, the central decimal file would have been saved and the travel vouchers discarded. The process itself is not the challenge of archival work, much less the task of analyzing it. The thinking work of archives, the demanding work, is external to archives. It is rooted in the subject knowledge base an archivist brings in. If that is sound, then the particular style an archivist adopts is irrelevant.

Experiments to test theoretical models in any aspect of archival work—not just appraisal—should be taken with a shaker of salt. They will not uncover immutable laws, like those of physics, but vacuous principles, like those of management. Such studies tend to concentrate upon the moot, the unimportant, and the unanswerable. Richard Lytle's research on retrieval theory, for instance, may not apply beyond the records in his own custody. Suitability of retrieval method easily could vary according to the records, the repository, or the researchers. Even if content indexing hits on ten of ten unrealistically specific research requests and provenance method on only one, prove-

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[11]Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (Signet Classic reprint of 1910 edition), 63-64.

nance method would still have a validity that could never be replaced by content indexing. Off-the-shelf software packages give any archivist the ability to produce a workable, if imperfect content-indexing scheme that is compatible with provenance arrangement so it is a moot point anyway. The whole controversy, as is apparent from the discussion in Richard Berner's book, reduces archivists to the level of bickering over such things as the amount of information that should be included in folder titles, as if any archivist could ever benefit from theoretical deliberations on such an issue.[12]

Even with the overworked banalities and unenlightening reification, the first school of archival theory at least has the advantage of being about archival work. The other schools verge on something else. While those schools are correct in saying that archivists must rely on other disciplines for the information they will need to make informed decisions, they are incorrect in trying to fit such information into an archival framework.

Urging archivists to move into the post-custodial era, Gerald Ham made excellent recommendations for developing more efficient custodial practices,[13] but he went over the archival edge in suggesting that archival concepts could be dynamic. Ham argued that archivists had to cease being weathervanes "moved by the changing moods of historiography." He implied that it was flawed archival theory that prevented urban archives from appearing until after urban history became fashionable. He complained, justly, about the limited vision that resulted in archives traditionally documenting the history of the rich and powerful while neglecting the poor and ordinary.[14] But no formula or plan of action could have prevented such things from happening. No archival theory could have enabled archivists to see the deficiencies. Archives necessarily are reactive and dependent. Archivists cannot set about filling gaps until somebody recognizes that they exist. No one should be critical of archivists of the 1920s for not understanding class biases in documentation that would not have been perceived until the *Annales* school appeared in the 1930s, or until historians like Jesse Lemisch and Howard Zinn started impressing similar ideas upon American audiences in the 1960s. Whether archivists respond directly to the demands of the marketplace or try to perceive and rectify its defects, that marketplace will always be the point of reference. No archives strategies can hope to circumvent it. That is, unless you are of the mind that, had sufficiently advanced archival theories been in place by 1860, for example, a fully-stocked labor archives could have been ready and waiting for John R. Commons when he invented labor history in 1890.

Similarly, Frank Burke has proposed that archival theorists search for formulas to help archivists "rise above their own social and intellectual environment."[15] That is, as meaningless and unobtainable a goal as Ham's that archivists transcend the marketplace. Every archivist, every historian, every asparagus farmer, is trapped by a social and intellectual milieu. Individuals should try to be aware of their possible biases while trying to reason out solutions to their problems on a case-by-case basis. Archivists are not so much more resourceful than the rest of society that they can develop broad theories to free them from their biases.

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[12]Richard H. Lytle, "Intellectual Access to Archives," *American Archivist* 43 (Winter 1980 and Spring 1980): 64-75 and 191-206; Berner, *Archival Theory and Practice*, 70-72.

[13]F. Gerald Ham, "Archival Strategies for the Post-Custodial Era," *American Archivist* 44 (Summer 1981): 207-16.

[14]F. Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *American Archivist* 38 (January 1975): 5-8.

[15]Burke, "Future Course of Archival Theory," 43.

Burke further advocates developing theories that would encompass insights drawn from a variety of disciplines, such as library science, cultural anthropology, and sociology. In particular, he calls for archival theorists to incorporate the findings of studies on bureaucratic management and decision-making in order to produce archival standards more likely to ensure the retention of the key documents of an organization.[16]

Intelligent archival work must draw on a knowledge of historiography and sociology and other fields, but such knowledge cannot be distilled into a coherent archival theory that would be useful. First, it would be repetitive. If there are theories of bureaucratic organization that would assist an archivist, reading those theories in their original state would be sufficient. They need not be reread as part of some cut-and-paste archival theory. Practicing archivists are not so dim that they must have everything digested for them by theorists. Second, until there is an Esperanto of bureaucratic organization and an Esperanto of records creation, there cannot be a canon of content-based archival thought that would be an accurate guide to anything. Any such construct would be either too broad or too specific to be meaningful. Unless one were to be satisfied with the most basic of concepts—an archival theory flowing entirely from the distinction between diads and triads—an incredibly complex theory of exceptions would be required. For a cabinet-level government agency based on management by objective and run by an organization man, you should retain subject files; for a small corporation based on unit management and ruled by an egotist, you should collect the CEO's correspondence files; for a historical society controlled by a board of trustees and administered by a librarian, you should keep

the back issues of *Provenance*. Of course, all that would not absolve the archivist of the responsibility for learning about the specific organization, determining in reality, rather than in theory, where the decisions were made and how they were documented, and ultimately discarding the theory for the possession of fact.

Burke also proposes moving the content-based school of theory into an area in which archives themselves become a subject. He proposes that archival theorists study the reasons why societies create records, the place of archives in society, and the impulse in human nature to revere artifacts. It seems unlikely that such questions would yield much to advance archival work. The answers they would elicit undoubtedly would be the conventional ones about not forgetting the past so as not to repeat it, and probably would in no way alter an archivist's responsibility to save, maintain, and retrieve historically valuable documents. Even if the questions were worth answering, it would be beyond the competence of archivists to do so; such questions should be studied by those specifically trained to study psycho-social phenomena, namely, sociologists and psychologists.

Michael Lutzker carries this movement into other disciplines a step further. Not only does he concur with Burke's call to integrate archival theory with bureaucratic theory, he asks if it would be "fantasy" to suggest that such a concoction would give archivists a unique understanding of bureacracies and, as a result, a new role as bureaucratic ombudsmen.[17] Certainly it would be fantasy. Where Gerald Ham would take archivists into the post-custodial era, Lutzker would take archivists into the post-archival era. It is exciting to think that archivists could swallow a pill of Schellen-

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[16]Ibid., 42-44.

[17]Michael A. Lutzker, "Max Weber and the Analysis of Modern Bureaucratic Organization: Notes Toward a Theory of Appraisal," *American Archivist* 45 (Spring 1982): 130.

berg, inhale a line of Max Weber, and see themselves making decisions and mediating conflicts, but it is sobering to consider that the medicine will not help archivists cope with researchers who refuse to put documents back into their proper folders. Lutzker's fantasy is not about archives but about power and status—status archivists are unlikely to enjoy, and power archivists are not qualified to wield. Even if archival concepts could enlighten the industrial relations process, using such concepts in that way would not be an archival concern. It is one thing for disciplines to borrow from each other; it is another for disciplines to aggrandize.

Beyond the ideas in archival theory, there are disquieting social aspects as well. Recognizing archival theory as fully as Burke recommends would promote an unhealthy stratification within the profession. Burke calls for full-time, career archival theorists who would philosophize and interpret for archival clinicians as theologians philosophize and interpret for parish priests. Such a division of labor is not only unnecessary, it is counter-productive.

Functional specialization may be a management imperative. With so many varying demands on an individual archivist's time, functional specialization may be the only way for administrators of overburdened and understaffed archival institutions to ensure that staff members can focus their attention on specific projects long enough to complete them. But from a purely archival point of view, functional specialization is a mistake. Individual archival functions are the easiest part of archival work. They are easily learned, easily done, and do not demand specialized attention. More important, functional specialization detracts from the one thing that makes archival work a true profession and the one resource on which the profession can draw to make a contribution to society: the knowledge base of the individual archivist. It is subject specialization that makes an archivist compe-

tent, not functional expertise. The opportunity to perform all archival functions in a few record groups increases the knowledge base, whereas functional specialization across many record groups restricts it.

Likewise, separating archival brains from archival brawn by dividing theory functions from clinical ones would reduce, rather than enhance, archival understanding. As biologist Stephen Jay Gould has pointed out, "the separation of head and hand has done much to set and limit the course of science throughout history. . . . Medieval barber-surgeons who had to deal with battlefield casualties did more to advance the practice of medicine than academic physicians who rarely examined patients and who based their treatment on a knowledge of . . . learned texts."[18]

Perhaps the best analogy would be with the Progressive historians. Like the archival theorists Burke would like to see, the Progressive historians borrowed from other disciplines to produce an overall conception of who they were, where they stood, why they were historians, and what historical scholarship could accomplish. Their work was animated by a spirit and a self-knowledge that probably approximates what Burke envisions for archives. But they neither waited for marching orders from historical theorists nor devoted themselves to theoretical pondering. Their theoretical advances were synonymous with their work, which was, moreover, the most basic type of original historical research. Until people like Charles Beard turned to metahistory in their dotage, the Progressive historians mucked about in long-ignored primary resources and produced monographs. Their nuts-and-bolts work and their visionary ideas were one. Their research informed their

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[18]Stephen Jay Gould, *Ever Since Darwin: Reflections in Natural History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 212-13.

theories and their theories informed their research. To have separated the research function from the theorizing function would have invalidated both.

Two more points on the social implications of archival theory should be considered. Burke's disclaimers to the contrary,[19] a division between theorists and clinicians would create an unnecessary hierarchy—theorists would lord it over clinicians as theologians lord it over parish priests and engineers over mechanics. In more demanding fields, this may be appropriate; in archives, it is not. Second, withdrawn into their cloisters, archival theorists undoubtedly would come up with new models, whether they are needed or not, and those models undoubtedly would be imposed upon practicing archivists, whether they are workable or not.

Finally, interest in archival theory may be an outgrowth of the archival profession's colossal inferiority complex. That inferiority complex permeates every issue of the *American Archivist*, as archivists ask each other how they can prove themselves, how they can market themselves more effectively, how they can bring in more customers, how they can compete for more dollars, and, generally, how they can be more and more like George Babbitt.[20] Campaigns for certification, public awareness, archival autonomy, and control of archival training programs do not seem to be stimulating professional challenges so much as boring self-promotion. Functional specialization may play a role here; such a

division of labor would give the appearance of professional uniqueness more than one that apes the organization of a history department. Archival theory is rooted firmly in all this. As Richard Cox and others have insisted, "specialized knowledge or systematic theory" is essential if archivists are to wear the mantle of professionalism.[21] Whether the theory has any inherent value might be secondary; what counts, it seems, is putting on a good show.

But archival theory is not a good show. Many of its controversies are embarrassingly puny. Others are pointlessly large, as theorists tackle questions that can never be answered by theory. Much of the theory consists of overwrought abstractions about the obvious. Some of the theory is completely extraneous to archival work. Theory in archives does not play the same role as theory in other disciplines. Archival theory misses the whole point about what is important in the field, as it inevitably concentrates on what archivists do rather than on what they know. Archival theory can encourage an unhealthy class structure within the profession. And archival theory may emanate less from professional needs than from psychological desires.

Having said all of this, I am going to take a little of it back. Archivists do have common goals and interests, which must be understood and advanced. Nearly all of the works to which I have referred offer first-rate suggestions of improvements, and many of the specific problems they address should not be minimized. Archival questions must be asked and debated, better solutions must be sought, and, as professionals, archivists must always assess their performance and their assumptions.

What I question is the willful refusal to see the trees because of a steely determination to hallucinate a forest. I am skeptical

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[19] Burke, "Future Course of Archival Theory," 46.

[20] See, for example, Bruce W. Dearstyne, "What is the Use of Archives? A Challenge for the Profession," *American Archivist* 50 (Winter 1987): 76-87; Elsie Freeman (Freivogel), "Education Programs: Outreach as an Administrative Function," *American Archivist* 41 (April 1978): 147-53; Elsie T. Freeman, "In the Eye of the Beholder: Archives Administration from the User's Point of View," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984): 111-23; and Richard J. Cox, "Professionalism and Archivists in the United States," *American Archivist* 49 (Summer 1986): 229-47.

21. Cox, "Professionalism," 232.

of universal laws and all-encompassing models, and disdainful of intellectualizing about things that are not all that difficult. We must recognize the difference between inquiry and intelligent inquiry. We should be professional enough to analyze, but disciplined enough that we do not find ourselves running concordances on subject files, applying deconstructionist techniques to the information on box labels, or pursuing other stupid but seemingly elevated investigations. Archivists pull their weight when they talk to society about the records in their care. To do that, archivists sometimes have to talk to each other about what they do. But it is easy to stray too far from the ultimate point of utility. Increasingly, we are talking to ourselves about ourselves, and that is not theory. It is narcissism.

Infatuated with chimeras such as archival theory, public relations, certification, and functional specialization, our profession is moving in the wrong direction. It is moving toward the artificial, the self-centered, and the trivial, and it is moving away from the substantial, the socially useful, and the engaging. If we keep on like this, we will turn ourselves into a crowd of nattering schoolmarms, mesmerized with the archival equivalent of how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.