Research Article

Archival Theory Redux and Redeemed: Definition and Context Toward a General Theory

FREDERICK J. STIELOW

Abstract: Recent critics have argued that archival work is inherently too simplistic for theoretical discussion. Careful definition of terms and systematic analysis of historical development demonstrates that archivists can benefit from the conscious development of general principles to explain and analyze in ways that solve problems and redress past mistakes. Archives is a metadiscipline in an applied context, whose theory embraces elements from the humanities, science, and organizational theory. The author proposes a general theory or mission statement for archivists that balances their administrative responsibilities with their duty to insure the development of a documentary heritage.

About the author: *Frederick J. Stielow is an associate professor at the School of Library and Information Science of Catholic University where he teaches archives and information technology. He has a dual Ph.D. in History and American Studies and an MLS with an archival concentration. Stielow has published some fifty articles and five books, including* The Management of Oral History Sound Archives, *for which he was awarded the Society of American Archivists' Leland Prize.* *The author wishes to acknowledge a number of people who contributed to the manuscript's tortuous evolution: Frank Burke, Sue Falb, and Richard Lytle, plus participants in the 1987 Research Fellowship Program for the Study of Modern Archives at the University of Michigan, especially Roland Baumann, Larry Dowler, Lee Stout, and Rich Szary.*

> If they examine their present methods, archivists are likely to explain how certain practices arose and what they actually are and, while doing so, are likely to discover ways of improving and clarifying them. For archivists should have the professional probity to investigate new concepts and ideas and, if necessary, to correct past mistakes of methods and principles.[1]

THE LOGIC OF T. R. Schellenberg's call seems unassailable, yet the debate over archival theory persists and repeats itself. To some, like George Bolotenko and John Roberts, any archival theory remains an oxymoron. Archives are merely a subset of history, and the work is inherently too simplistic to merit theoretical discussion.[2] Others, myself included, hold a grander vision of archival theory as essential to professionalization, the building of a distinct knowledge base, and the unlimited prospects of a new Information Age.

Any discussion of archival theory should be based on careful definition of terms, wide-ranging research, and understanding of historical context. We need a benchmark to rise above the polemics and unsubstantiated interpretations that have characterized recent discussions.

Historical Background and a Basic Definition

The debate over theory can be viewed as a byproduct of the historical accidents and psychological tendencies behind the modern American archives movement. The key figures are the archivists/historians who organized the National Archives and the Society of American Archivists in the 1930s. They provide a convenient point of departure for a historical analysis.

William Birdsall was among the first to demonstrate how those pioneers reflected the training and tendencies of the American historical profession at the time. European scholars, most notably Otto von Ranke, had launched the new field of history in the early nineteenth century on a ship of science and logical positivism. They were "scientific historians" in search of "the past as it really was," basing objectivity in the impartiality of the "allied sciences of history." The low criticism of archivally germane skills in documentary verification (e.g., codicology, diplomatics and paleography) helped verify the high criticism of the historian.[3]

Scientific history did not translate precisely when history was transported to the "new university" movement in the United States. The simplistic nature of American records—limited in time, languages, and written formats—did not demand such rigor. Moreover, historical practitioners in America soon became disenchanted with absolutes and a naive search for "Truth." By the First World War, academic history felt the effects of a new breed of Progressive scholars who replaced "scientific" certitudes with relativistic interpretations. In the process, Progressive historians incubated a legacy of doubt in social science theory and an unease with mathematical formulae—a legacy passed on to students, who included the first generation of archivists at the National Archives.

The emerging band in Washington needed practical precepts but, as Harold Pinkett has shown, was able to escape from the burden of "heavy" theorizing by careful selective

[1]T. R. Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 64.

[2]George Bolotenko, "Archivists and Historians: Keepers of the Well," *Archivaria* 16 (1983/84): 5-25; See also the special response issue (vol. 17) and scattered replies in vol. 18 and 19; John Roberts, "Archival Theory: Much Ado About Shelving," *American Archivist* 50 (1987): 66-75; a second article by Roberts, "Archival Theory: Myth or Banality," *American Archivist* 53 (1990): 110-20, appeared after this article was effectively finalized.

[3]William Birdsall, "The Two Sides of the Desk," *American Archivist* 1975 (38): 159-74.

borrowing from European archival antecedents.[4] The Europeans' sense of priorities was clear. Samuel Muller, J. A. Feith, and Robert Fruin's classic text of archival management stated that "archival demands take precedence over antiquarian demands."[5] Even the historically oriented Sir Hilary Jenkinson made clear that the "Archivist, then, is the servant of his Archives first and afterwards of the student Public."[6] Because of deference or allegiance to (some would say the envy of) their parent field, American archivists often contravened the central administrative precept of the European theoreticians by developing a passive institution emphasizing service to historians. Although Margaret Cross Norton and a few others sought to point out the inconsistency, the American archival mainstream's ideal largely shunned administrative responsibilities to the parent institution.

This choice seriously inhibited the development of American archival theory. According to Ernst Posner, the field eventually rejected substantial theoretical breakthroughs toward a more active institution made during the Second World War with the creation of records management. Instead, what passed for theorizing generally degenerated into a longstanding overemphasis and rehashing of limited and essentially settled questions on arrangement and description. By the mid-1950s Posner could only decry the defensive and narrow focus of his colleagues for whom "building up a special science of archivist techniques has been a supplementary task. It seems as if the different methods of dispatching business, of making and keeping records, will hamper the attempt to draw up a theory of archival economy."[7]

The object of Posner's lament would continue. With the notable exception of Schellenberg, archivists eschewed conscious recourse to the development of theory. By the 1970s, however, the dawn of the Information Age summoned a different cadre of archivists. Some were now trained in interdisciplinary and quantitative modes of historical inquiry and others in librarianship, an adjunct field that had often been viewed as a pariah or evil stepmother. The new generation joined portions of the old to help stimulate professionalization and an identity distinct from history. The onset of automated storage and retrieval forced archivists to break down the artform of archives into its constituent parts in order to address the problems and implications of new communications media. The presence of federal grant moneys, the creation of a full-time staff at the Society of American Archivists, the development of the regional archives groups, and the emergence of full-time archival educators and graduate programs all contributed to the new direction.[8]

It remained for Frank Burke to crystallize the debate in 1981 with "The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States." Deliberately provocative, he championed the idea of archival theory at the expense of historical theory, while questioning either's legitimacy in narrow scientific terms. His arguments also rested

[4]Harold Pinkett, "American Archival Theory," *American Archivist* 44 (1981): 217-22.

[5]Samuel Muller, J.A. Feith, and Robert Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* (New York: Wilson, 1969), 65, originally issued in Dutch in 1898.

[6]Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archival Administration*, 2d ed. (1937, reprint; London: Percy Lund, Humphries, 1965), 124.

[7]Ernst Posner, "The National Archives and the Archival Theorist," in *Archives and the Public Interest: Selected Essays by Ernst Posner*, ed. Kenneth W. Munden (Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1967), 34.

[8]Richard Cox, "American Archival Literature," *American Archivist* 50 (1987): 306-23, argues for the rise of a new literature component beginning in 1972; Trudy Peterson, "The National Archives and the Archival Theorist Revisited," *American Archivist* 49 (1986): 125-32, attempts to update Posner and gives additional governmental imperatives for a third stage of theorizing beginning in the late 1960s.

on a semantic dilemma—"Could archivists have theory without understanding the definition of that term?"[9]

The paradox still continues and is complicated by basic linguistic difficulties in communicating about any abstract quality. Instead of assumptions, we need a shared basis for discussion. The easiest redress is to start at the most logical source: a dictionary. The first meaning given to *theory* in the *American Heritage Dictionary* is: "Systematically organized knowledge applicable in a relatively wide variety of circumstances, esp. a system of assumptions, accepted principles, and rules of procedures devised to analyze, predict, or otherwise explain the nature or behavior of a specified set of phenomena."[10] In the words of Mary Hesse in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, any such paradigm also must be flexible, "capable of assimilating an indefinite number of new observations without themselves radically changing in meaning."[11]

The concept of theory does not demand fustian exposition. It is simply the codification of rational and systematic thinking, the conscious development of general principles or guides to explain or analyze.

The Roots of Theory

In addition to the dictionary definition, critics of archival theory can be sent to the history books and literature on theory for proper references. The accepted roots of theory, for example, date to the ancient Greek philosophers in general and to Aristotle in particular. He culminated the evolution of abstract thought as expressed in all-encompassing classification systems. Later, the renaissance of such theorists and classification skills provided the underpinnings to the scientific revolution and the post-Scholastic enterprises of René Descartes, Francis Bacon, and Linnaeus.[12] Thus, one can only wonder at John Roberts with his "yet, ultimately, they [archival theories] have to do with organization, categorization and retrieval, and hence are largely practical tools."[13] Organization and categorization are at the heart of theory construction for any discipline.

Commentators on both sides of the issue overly mystify the meaning of theory. Actually, the most important theories are often the most obvious. Indeed, the "search for the obvious" dominates current research in artificial intelligence and linguistics. Economist Lionel Robbins provides a cogent argument for simplicity and the production of theory from "self-evident truths" in his classic, *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science*:

> We do not need controlled experiments to establish their validity: they arise so much the stuff of our everyday experience that they have only to be stated to be recognized as obvious. Indeed, the danger is that they may be thought to be so obvious that nothing significant can be derived from their future examination. Yet in fact it is on the postulates of this sort that the complicated theorems of advanced analysis ultimately depend.[14]

[9]Frank Burke, "The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States," *American Archivist* 44 (1981): 40-51. Citation analysis reveals his piece to be one of the key articles in all of archival literature. For the classic study of linguistic effects, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: MacMillan, 1953).

[10]*American Heritage Dictionary*, 2d College ed., s.v. "theory."

[11]Mary Hesse, "Laws and Theories," in Paul Edwards, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 4 (New York: Crowell, Collier & Macmillan, 1967), 407.

[12]In addition to the specific works on theory cited in this essay, a broad search was conducted on the classical literature on the topic from Aristotle to Bertrand Russell, as well as an online search of more recent work using DIALOG database services.

[13]Roberts, "Archival Theory: Much Ado About Shelving," 68.

[14]Lionel Robbins, *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* (London: MacMillan,

Moreover, what is blatantly obvious to some is often the product of painstaking experimentation and not so intuitive to others. For instance, some believe provenance and original order to be too transparent. Yet, give someone who has never heard of those terms a collection to organize, and what will be the result?[15] Why the new awakening to such "obvious" practices as appraisal, documentation strategies, and preservation? Why had we not explored the improbabilities and impossibilities implied by "permanence" for retention long before James O'Toole did so?[16] What of my hypothesis that the communication problems between archivists and librarians devolve to the most basic philosophical dichotomy? Librarians are Platonists, who are taught to deal with absolute categories and ideal classifications, whereas archivists are Aristotelians, who think and organize in a relativistic framework.

Scientific Theory and the Paradigm Shift of the 1980s

The tendency to call for one absolute type of theory—specifically, to establish oppositions between humanistic discourse and the scientific method—poses another problem. The most notable archival example is Burke's call for an exclusively scientific methodology.[17] Contrary to Burke's suppositions, valid theory construction in science does not exclude history or mandate rigid posturing and absolutes. Famed scientist Stephen J. Gould, in a landmark study on the unpredictable and multifarious nature of natural events, proclaimed: "The large domains of nature—cosmology, geology, and evolution—must be studied with the tools of history."[18] Physical science has moved away from pure determinism to probability theory, and even to the seeming illogic of some aspects of subatomic physics, where measuring either the position or the velocity of a particle makes the other measurement uncertain (Heisenberg's uncertainty principle).[19] Even Karl Popper, the doyen of logical positivism and fount for Burke's anti-history logic, admitted the possibility of a wide range of origins for theories.

> The task of formulating an acceptable definition of the idea of 'empirical science' is not without its difficulties.

1935), 79, to which one could add the observations of persons such as Roland Barthes in semiology or Edmund Husserl in phenomenology, or perhaps the ten-year attempt to model "common sense" at the Microelectronics and Computer Technology Corporation, where "fuzzy" scientists, in an attempt to circumvent the linear, monotonic reasoning of typical programs, read tabloid newspapers into a powerful computer and ask the machine what information it needs to decipher the contents.

[15]This observation comes from long experience in teaching proto-archivists and librarians, who on first impulse will often rearrange the world if given the opportunity. A further example is of a former student aide who, when given the task of reshelving a classified rare book collection, did so by size. On some of the other information management techniques that are so "obvious," I challenge the neophyte (or, to judge by my failures in such endeavors, perhaps even the more advanced) to produce an effective abstract, index, or faceted thesaurus by information standards.

[16]James O'Toole, "On the Idea of Permanence," *American Archivist* 52 (1989): 10-25.

[17]Some of the important criticism of Burke includes Lester Cappon, "What, Then, Is There to Theorize About?," *American Archivist* 45 (1982): 12-25; and Gregg Kimball, "The Burke-Cappon Debate," *American Archivist* 48 (1985): 369-76, a study written under Burke's direction.

[18]Stephen J. Gould, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (New York: Norton, 1989), 277.

[19]Many works could be cited on the limits of scientific thought beginning with Emmanuel Kant. See, for example, Richard Feynman, *The Character of Physical Law* (Cambridge: MIT, 1965). On the early range of science toward probabilities and the potentials of operations research for archives, note John Von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), where advanced scientific theories are carved from a folk model of gambling. The reference to the Heisenberg Principle calls to mind Albert Einstein's comment to Werner Heisenberg on the value of theory: "It is the theory which decides what we can observe" (quoted in Richard Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 130).

> Some of these arise from *the fact* that there must be many theoretical systems with a logical structure very similar to the one which at any time is the accepted system of empirical sciences.[20]

One can easily challenge Burke's call for absolutes by noting that the objects of archival inquiry are artificial, manmade enterprises—not the more predictable clash of atoms or chemical reactions. His overly idealized view of science is itself readily refuted by a reading of the very human foibles of scientists in Thomas Kuhn's modern classic, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, or a variety of other sources.[21]

Once exclusivity of a single method is rejected, Burke's real contribution becomes apparent. He reversed prior humanistic biases to help establish that the stages of hypothesis formation and empirical testing have their place in the bedrock of any archival "science" or "economy." Indeed, the dominant direction for the improvement of archival services in the future likely will lie in the long-ignored arena of experimentation and empiricism.[22]

Burke can also be seen as a harbinger of a "paradigm shift" in archival thought. In the 1980s the forces that contributed to the revival of theory pushed archivists toward an administrative and information science focus. In the process, the "cutting edge" of archival thought has swung away from primary concerns with the document or storage media and toward a new realization of the importance of the information itself. The shift is so recent that it is sometimes difficult to see. The contributions of acknowledged pioneers like Charles Dollar, Richard Lytle, and David Bearman date only to the late 1970s.[23] One may also cite evidence as diverse as the microcomputer revolution, the USMARC Archival and Manuscripts Control (AMC) format, the Research Fellowship Program for the Study of Modern Archives at the University of Michigan, and the establishment of a program for individual certification. For additional proof, compare SAA annual meeting programs from 1970 or so to the trend beginning in the early 1980s with new theory-based topics ranging from descriptive standards to artificial intelligence.

Recent antitheorists are no doubt reacting against this shift, which is understandable, but their writings tend to ridicule archival work and then ignore any improvements or potential, which is not. Trivialization makes for amusing rhetoric but demands solid scholarship for legitimacy. Instead, we are given circular logic where bald assumption is fact and progress is impossible. Such assertions require extra proof for validity, because the overwhelming weight of current criticism recognizes the value and complexity of information. We have entered a new age.[24]

[20]Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York:Harper & Row, 1965), 39. See also Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957). Maurice Mandelbaum, *The Problem of Historical Knowledge* (New York: Liveright, 1983) and *History, Man and Reason* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1971) provides a definitional rejoinder to Popper's attack on history with the tautological observation that the holism and longitudinal studies of the historian can easily embrace the results of the scientists' testings.

[21]Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970); Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1975) presents a more vitriolic attack which questions the very basis of scientific integrity.

[22]For an example of such testing, see Avra Michelson, "Description and Reference in the Age of Automation, " *American Archivst* 50 (1987): 192-209.

[23]Charles Dollar, "Appraising Machine-Readable Records," *American Archivist* 41 (1978): 423-30; Richard Lytle, "Intellectual Access to Archives," *American Archivist* 43 (1980): 64-76, 191-208; for David Bearman, one can now most conveniently turn to his *Archives and Museum Informatics Newsletter*, (1987-).

[24]For an example of popular thinking on the power of information, see Alvin Toffler, *Powershift* (New York: Bantam, 1990). The denigration of archival

What may be shocking in ten years is how little we know today. Just as the nineteenth century rediscovered history, people in the late twentieth century are rediscovering the power and complexity of human communication and information. The archival structures erected in the nineteenth century may need to be examined and retailored in light of the Information Age. There is much to learn, and ignorance is rarely a justifiable defense.

Work on descriptive standards, for example, is well underway; however, the focus is still limited to somewhat dated library controls and old-fashioned data models—the applicability of "fuzzy" logic, natural language, and hypertext for automated description is barely touched. Similarly, the revolutionary implications of field or subitem level controls are just dawning. Information science alone has a string of possible advances in information storage and retrieval, e.g., coordinate indexing, relevancy feedback models, set theory, and weighted queries. One can imagine archivists employing queuing theory from operations research for organizing the retrieval of large data sets, or the equivalent of Lotka's Law and Bradford Equations as mathematical aids to appraisal and retention scheduling. George Zipf's Law of Least Effort can be used for the design of information systems and also to argue against librarians' "flat" views that apply the same energies to the description of all materials, irregardless of value. At a lighter level Mooer's Law ("An information retrieval system will tend *not* to be used whenever it is more painful and troublesome for a customer to have information than for him not to have it") comes in handy when thinking about microfilm.[25]

practice and potential as too "practical" or "obvious" are of interest, given the amount of money invested in the modeling of far less complex domains at the "cutting edge" analysis in artificial intelligence and expert systems, as explored, for example, at a Special Libraries Association conference on "Intelligent Systems," Washington, DC, October, 1990.

The Historical Component

Having argued for the importance—but not the exclusivity—of hypothesis formation and empirical testing, it is equally important to defend the continuing legitimacy of humanistic inquiry. Roberts and Bolotenko are certainly correct in touting the value of historical theory and methodology. The question again is one of degree and exclusivity. Do American historians really have theories sufficient to encompass the entire spectrum of archival responsibilities?[26]

As already indicated, American historians generally rejected the most archivally germane elements of Rankean "scientific history," elements that still dominate continental archival education. The series on diplomatics by Luciana Duranti in the pages of *Archivaria* demonstrates the continuing applicability of such approaches.[27] If American historians and their theories are so applicable in the absence of such training, one is hard pressed to explain the pov-

[25]On theories in information science, see Pranas Zunde and John Gehl, "Empirical Foundations of Information Science," *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology (ARIST)*, vol. 14 (White Plains, NY: Knowledge Industry, 1979), 67-92; Bert Boyce and Donald Kraft, "Principles and Theories in Information Science," *ARIST*, vol. 20 (White Plains: Knowledge Industry, 1985), 153-78; Laurence Heilprin, *Toward Foundations of Information Science* (White Plains: Knowledge Industry Publications, 1985). Heilprin's personal comments also helped shape this essay. The list of contributing theoreticians that archivists should be aware of is long: begin with Vannevar Bush, Eugene Garfield, Hans Peter Luns, Claude Shannon, Herbert Simon, Mortimer Taube, and Norbert Weiner.

[26]This questioning stategy speaks to the Socratic method as well as the standard scientific technique of positing a null hypothesis.

[27]The multi-part presentation begins with Luciana Duranti, "Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science," *Archivaria* 28 (1989): 7-24. Janet Turner, "Experimenting with New Tools," *Archivaria* 30 (1990): 91-103, provides a fine practical example of such applications.

erty of research skills found among historians by Margaret Steig and Walter Rundell, or to counter the findings of Hans Booms on the relative failure of appraisal based on expected historical interest.[28]

History itself struggles for credibility today. Moreover, mainstream history's training, biases, and minute differentiation of research topics mitigate against widely applicable historical theories with a capital T. It is fair to say that with few exceptions (e.g., Marxism) history as a discipline now lacks general explanatory laws. In point of fact, the theory of American historians is only descriptive. It emerges after the fact of the documentation and now is concentrated in unsystematically connected literature or historiography. The extent to which historiography can be adapted to govern archival matters is nothing more than a hypothesis to be tested over time.[29]

Still, the holism and the longitudinal focus of history are of more than passing value for archives. They provide the methodological bedrock for appraisal and documentation strategies. Other positive examples abound.[30] At the very least, we can agree with Richard Cox that "archival history is a gateway through which to examine some of the fundamental questions about the nature of records and information."[31]

Finally, history itself is no longer parochial. Since the 1960s, historians have borrowed methodologies and theories from other disciplines, like sociology and psychology. History departments have even opened their doors to the empiricism of statistics with cliometrics. Such loans and adaptations are now accepted as part of the field and interdisciplinary approaches are increasingly a norm.

A Metadiscipline

The ability to import from other fields is not unique to history. Indeed, part of the lessons of the later twentieth century has been the blurring of methodological lines originally drawn in the nineteenth century to separate the academic disciplines within the new university. Such blending is particularly applicable for the archival field, for archives is by definition a *metadiscipline*. It provides services at a level above (meta) specific issues or disciplines and whose theory is synthetic and expansive, embracing elements from both the humanities and science.

Archivists are called upon to manage materials created by every possible discipline or activity and to provide them for questioners from every conceivable background. The knowledge base required to support this activity must include an understanding of the archivist's role as an intermediary in an information exchange, an appreciation of the peculiar nature of information/media, and recognition of the wide assortment of problem-solving approaches or theoretical paradigms employed by users. With the exception of historiography, how-

[28]Margaret Steig, "The Information Needs of Historians," *College and Research Libraries* 42 (1981): 549-60; Walter Rundell, Jr., *In Pursuit of American History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970); Hans Booms, "Society and the Formation of the Documentary Heritage: Issues in the Appraisal of Archival Sources," *Archivaria* 24 (1987). Jenkinson, *Manual*, p. 123, noted that much of the bad archival work done in the past had resulted from attempting to serve scholarly trends. Other traditional areas for possible contribution would certainly include hermeneutics.

[29]Arthur Danto, *Analytic Philosophy of History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1968); Patrick Gardiner, ed., *Theories of History* (New York: Free Press, 1959). On current trends in modern thought against the grand theory, see George Marcus and Michael Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

[30]Clark Elliot, "Communication and Events in History: Toward a Theory for Documenting the Past," *American Archivist* 48 (1985): 357-68, is an excellent example of the value of historical scholarship for archives.

[31]Richard Cox, "On the Value of Archival History in the United States," *Libraries and Culture* 23 (1988): 42; see also his "Archivists and Historians," *Archivaria* 19 (1984/85), an article in response to Bolotenko.

ever, this last segment of the archival knowledge base has barely been explored.

A distinct knowledge base for archives will emerge within this mandate. Even the direct borrowing of theories need not threaten the integrity or identity of the field. In keeping with the experiences of the historical discipline and the findings of F. S. C. Northrop in his famed *The Logic of Science and the Humanities*, such borrowed theories become an integral part of the field. Northrop, who championed the blurring of artificial distinctions between the sciences and the humanities, noted that a field's identity must be based first "with the peculiar character of its particular problem" and not through some borrowed method.[32]

Organizational and Applied Theory

As we have seen, the problem set for archives is not fully contained either by the description and prediction of phenomena or by reflective historical analyses that have no power to change events. The "particular problem" is the control, delivery, and preservation of manmade information, especially primary sources with enduring value.

To deal with the "particular problem," archival theory must also represent its "peculiar character." Following typical models of professionalization, the character of archives is defined in a circular fashion by the appearance of persons called archivists, who are designated to deal with the problem, and by the institutional context in which the problem is met. These two characteristics lead to a third kind of theory that augments humanistic and scientific analysis.

Organizational theory is the third type of approach associated with archival theory in the literature. The classic European texts, for example, implied such linkage and Solon Buck in 1941 explicitly declared archives to be "an applied science rather than a pure science."[33] This variety of theory is doubly important for archivists. Its use is beneficial for communication and the provision of information services for administrators; moreover, archivists themselves are frequently managers, who can benefit from such analysis.[34]

Modern organizational theory, with its use of "science" as an instrument of improvement, dates back to the early twentieth century. It began with Frederick Taylor's scientific management, but eventually recognized human factors such as the bureaucratic nature of institutions. By the 1970s, the purview was expanded to include information and automation advances under such rubrics as Management Information Systems (MIS) and then Information Resources Management (IRM).[35] Instead of description alone, these approaches stress actual control and prescription. This type of theory draws upon the earlier "pragmatic" or real-world theoret-

[32]F. S. C. Northrop, *The Logic of Science and the Humanities* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1959), 274.

[33]Solon Buck, "The Training of American Archivists," *American Archivist* 4 (1941): 65. Buck's phraseology even preceded the general acceptance of the term "applied theory," which followed the creation of the Social Science Research Council after World War II.

[34]For a convenient introduction to organizational thought and theory building, see Amitai Etzioni, comp., *Readings on Modern Organizations* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969). Terry Eastwood, "Nuturing Archival Education in the University," *American Archivist* 51 (1988): 228-51, presents a cogent defense for the existence of archival theory and would add legal knowledge to the mixture.

[35]For background to the evolution of scientific management and management thought, see Daniel Wren, *The Evolution of Management Thought*, 2d ed. (New York: Wiley, 1979); Claude George, Jr., *The History of Management Thought* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972); Raymond McLeod, Jr., *Management Information Systems*, 4th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1990). If effectiveness is a criterion for successful theories, it should be noted that Taylor's approaches are credited with increasing worker productivity by 2,000 percent by the 1960s. Ironically, similar increases have not been seen for knowledge workers, even with the introduction of computers.

ical perspectives popularized by William James:

> It appears less as a solution, then, than as a program for more work, and more particularly as an indicator of the ways in which existing realities may be changed. *Theories thus become instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest.* We don't like to lie back upon them, we move forward, and on occasion, make nature over again by their aid.[36]

Such theory formulation implies that human beings, who created the institution and its practices, have the power to alter directions. This recognition provides a further definitional rejoinder against theoretical naysayers. Unless they can demonstrate the perfection of current practices and the extension of that perfection to new communications media, anti-theorists are in another circular trap. Current imperfect practice can never be a perfecting mechanism. The only alternative is trial and error, which itself often involves hypothesis formation.

The archivist as organizational theorist should also be aware of some of the hidden implications of applied theory. We still might not get respect. Academicians tend to look down on anything that smacks of applied science; only some ill-defined "pure" theory is acceptable. More importantly, applied theorists themselves frequently overlook a longitudinal analysis, preferring to concentrate on the current state and projecting improvements for the future.

Ethical perspectives deserve attention as well, particularly because applied theory is also criticized for its support of the existing power structure. This leads to our final theoretical school, critical social theory, which has revolutionized the idea of theory formation in a number of fields from communications to law. Its proponents suggest that theory is never an independent creation in search for "truth," but the subconscious product of its social milieu. They revert to the Aristotelian distinction between *praxis* and *techne*—practice and theory. As Jürgen Habermas describes the critical perspective, the idea is to investigate "the constitutive historical complex of the constellation of self-interests, to which the theory still belongs across and beyond its acts of insight. On the other hand, it studies the historical interconnections of action, in which the theory, as action-oriented, can intervene."[37]

Toward a General Theory or Mission Statement

Having noted these reservations, we can use an applied perspective to chart a distinctive territory for archival theory. Talcott Parsons and other pioneers in applied theory carefully considered the implications of such actions in *Toward a General Theory of Action*. This text provided guidelines for the role of a general theory or mission statement (they are synonymous forms of abstraction) in the development of any applied field.[38] In it, they argued for an activist form of theory that: (1) aids in the codification of existing concrete knowledge; (2) guides further research and practice; and (3) facilitates the control of biases in observation and interpretation.[39]

[36]William James, *Pragmatism and Other Essays* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963), 26.

[37]Jürgen Habermas, *Theory and Practice* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 2.

[38]The term *mission* itself is a synonym for a type of theoretical position, which was popularized out of Peter Drucker's work in applied management theory with his creation of management by objective in the 1950s.

[39]Talcott Parsons and Edward Shils, eds. *Toward a General Theory of Action* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 3. A long list of authors from Parsons to Robert Merton is credited with the initial essay in this seminal volume on applied theory. Parsons should also be noted for his development of structural/ functionalism in the 1940s, which served as a model for institutional evaluation that has recently

The approach suggested in *Toward a General Theory of Action* is an apt one for archives. Given past confusion, current strife, and future potential, some general principles can aid in codifying current knowledge, guiding research and practice, and controlling biases. The starting point is historical and definitional: archivists are framed by the unique institutional context of archives. Archivists are agents of change, whose responsibility for solutions to the archival problems may be grouped under two first principles: administration and stewardship.

> **Administration Principle:** Archivists have a responsibility to serve their institution and its mission through the management of primary information, especially that of enduring value.

Unless one wishes to deny the past, it is hard to overlook an administrative focus and organizational theory. This recognition follows from the German *registraturprinzip* (original order) and has been clearly codified in the modern archival theory since Muller, Feith, and Fruin's landmark 1898 *Manual*. Their ideal, and the current trend in many governmental repositories, is to facilitate the intended evidential uses by administrators and bureaucrats of non-current records, which have frequently been removed from their agency of creation and placed in a depository. The administration principle is "self-evident" and purposely broad enough to range from records management to manuscript repositories with a cultural charge. Rather than assume the preeminence of the document or storage media, it focuses on the information itself and, by doing so, applies to the entire lifecycle of records.

If management services were all that archivists performed, however, they would indeed be mere clerks, clinicians, or perhaps members of a different field. The potential for archival professionalization derives from additional responsibilities to the documentation and to history.

> **Stewardship Principle:** Archivists have responsibilities to the materials in their charge and to insure the development of a documentary heritage from these.

This axiom defines a role equal to that of the administrative principle. Allegiance to the latter should never deny the importance of the documentary heritage and professional ethics. The stewardship principle distinguishes archivists and archival theorists from modern analysts in other applied and information fields who ignore historical context. Stewardship transcends purely informational values to include evaluation and curatorial responsibilities to the artifact and can assume a special relationship with those aiding the historical process. This principle presupposes preservation concerns and should act as a check to oversights such as the current absence of intrinsic values in appraisal models.[40]

Stewardship is philosophically and historically allied to democratic principles. In Bacon's phrase, "Knowledge is Power." The all-too-easily overlooked ethical and political importance of archives is perhaps best displayed through the counterpoint provided by Soviet archivists before the revolutions of 1989. V. M. Vinogradov and his colleagues proclaim archives as a science and an agent of the state and social control:

appeared in archival and information science literature, albeit without reference to Parsons or recognition of the later criticisms of that approach.

[40]The historical nature of archives as a nineteenth-century "cultural" invention along with new types of libraries and museums also has yet to be fully explored, but for basic ideas, see Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958); and Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1973). For a Canadian perspective on the theoretical implications of stewardship, see Hugh Taylor, "The Collective Memory: Archives and Libraries as Heritage," *Archivaria* 15 (1982/83): 118-30.

> The subject of archival science is the theoretical study of the archive system as an integral formation and the methodology of its organization, which are based on the philosophy of dialectic materialism and use the achievements of social and natural sciences (sociology, history, theory of social control, theory of information, systems theory, etc.).[41]

Democratic archivists should never deny such power and should recognize their own intellectual origins in the Enlightenment and the French and American Revolutions.[42] The ethical charge of state archives implied in the French Rights of Man or the United States Constitution goes beyond administrative services to the provision of information needed for an educated electorate, as well as to safeguard against the abuses of secret files and despotic controls. Manuscript repositories can obviously join in support of such directions. Moreover, this Jeffersonian mandate provides a partial redress for one of the basic limitations in applied theory—its tendency to support the political status quo uncritically.[43]

Unfortunately, in the enthusiasm of the recent paradigm shift stewardship has been left somewhat in the cold or placed in opposition to administration. The writings of Roberts and Bolotenko, for example, correctly reflect this oversight and recognize the rise of threats to the historical perspective. They fail to understand, however, that administration and stewardship are not mutually exclusive. Does not archival professionalization demand synthesis? Presuming agreement on the value of archives, should we not be seeking to avoid a potential schism between the cultural and historical school and its now burgeoning administrative and information science counterpart?[44] Would not the presence of consensually acceptable precepts have been of value in checking the drifting apart of the historical manuscripts and archives traditions, which Richard Berner has described, or the more recent split with records management?[45]

Finally, the first principles lead naturally to other subsidiary postulates or special theories on the way to an (dare we say) archival science. Such a science is a metadiscipline in which the archivist acts as intermediary between the material and the end user; hence, the archival experimenter enjoys a vast potential range for research. Assuming that there is something to learn, that the entire trend involving numerous disciplines in the study of information is not an aberration, and that archival practices are not perfected—we might close by posing an additional corollary on professionalization and the need to enhance the knowledge base.[46]

[41]V. M. Vinogradov, et al., "Theoretical Problems of Archive Maintenance from the Standpoint of Information Science," *Scientific and Technical Information Processing*, 11/5 (1984): 1-14.

[42]It is important to note that the theory behind the now "obvious" aspect of open access is fairly new; the practice dates only to the 1960s. See Trudy Peterson, "The National Archives and the Archival Theorist Revisited," *American Archivist* 49 (1986): 125-32,

[43]From a critical theory perspective, it should also be noted that the archives serve a legitimating function for the state in any socio-political order. In keeping with the post-Marxist analysis of Antonio Gramsci, they could be viewed as parts of the superstructure and the intellectual hegemony of American capitalism, much in the same manner as the Soviets appeared willing to employ.

[44]Current tendencies are exhibited in tensions among the historical community over perceived slights to historical content in the SAA's 1987 "Guidelines for Graduate Archival Education Programs" and the absence of history in the archival certification examination. On the other side, there are worries over the ability of historians to train would-be archivists in the new information technologies and retrieval systems.

[45]Richard Berner, *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982). Kenneth Duckett, *Modern Manuscripts: A Practical Manual for Their Management, Care, and Use* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1975) deserves credit for his attempt to remeld the archival and manuscript traditions.

[46]This postulate is also in keeping with automation and information science trends and such burgeoning

Development Postulate: Archivists have professional responsibilities to improve their knowledge and services, especially in regard to their role as intermediaries in the archival information process and the continuum between their sources and users.

Conclusions

To answer the question of how knowledge grows, Karl Mannheim once asked ironically, "Why is it, then, that we crave theoretical knowledge of something we have already possessed integrally in direct experience unmarred by the intrusion of the theoretical element?"[47] For too long, American archivists have avoided such a sophisticated query with the self-deprecatory retort, "Why archival theory, why rock the boat?" The fact is that archives and manuscript repositories are not perfect and that time does not stand still. We suffer from basic oversights and are in the midst of a revolution that is changing the nature of communication and elevating the importance of information. Denial, flagellation, trivialization, and the establishment of unnecessary oppositions do not satisfactorily address that reality.

Theories are tools that provide a context for understanding and solving problems, tools that can become synonymous with professionalism and the building of a knowledge base. Logically, one can therefore simply reverse the question to ask, "Why not?" To paraphrase Schellenberg, "What could possibly be wrong with learning new constructs and employing them to aid in understanding and solving archival problems or redressing past mistakes?"

subject areas as Information Resources Management. As Richard Lytle helped inform me, IRM offers new horizons and potential for archives as a node for the enhancement of information as a marketable commodity.

[47]Karl Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), 40.