Archivists and Social Responsibility: A Response to Mark Greene

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"It is better to debate a question without settling it than to settle a question without debating it."

—Joseph Joubert, *Notebooks*

"Diversity and independence are important because the best collective decisions are the product of disagreement and contest, not consensus or compromise."

—James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds*

Once again Mark Greene has contributed a thoughtful, reasoned, and challenging essay to the archival discourse, demonstrating why his voice has become one of the most compelling in the American archival profession. The breadth and depth of his analysis of critical issues facing the profession are impressive, as are the passion and commitment he demonstrates time after time.[1]

The importance of the issues he addresses here can be seen in the lively debates sparked during a brown bag discussion of Greene's essay during the August 2013 Society of American Archivists (SAA) annual meeting in New Orleans. Greene allowed *American Archivist* editor Gregory S. Hunter to distribute copies of his essay, before publication, as a catalyst for discussion. I am grateful to both of them for allowing me an opportunity to respond to his critique.

KEY WORDS

Archival Theory and Principles, Ethics, Writings about Archives

I chose the above epigrams by Joseph Joubert and James Surowiecki because they highlight the importance of debate, contestation, and disagreement. All too often, archivists in the United States seem unwilling to challenge each other, to hurt one another's feelings, to engage in spirited debate. We are too quick to seek consensus and compromise. In the spirit of friendly debate, I wish to point out several instances in which Greene either misunderstands or misrepresents my argument in support of a social justice perspective for archivists. On some of these points I may not have stated my views clearly enough; on others I think we simply disagree.

The Social Justice Imperative

Mark Greene's first sentence claims that Verne Harris and I (as the two people named in his footnote) argue that "to be an ethical archivist, one must pursue 'social justice' in all phases of archival practice."[2] He repeats this assertion throughout the essay, stating that we present the "social justice imperative" as "an obligation" (p. 303), a "mandate" (p. 307), a "crusade" (p. 328), and "required" of archivists (p. 314).[3] Underlying his entire essay is this assumption that those of us who accept Nelson Mandela's "call of justice" somehow seek to require that all archivists follow the same ethical path. We do not.

Although it may be a logical assumption that those of us advocating a social justice role for archives and archivists seek to make this a broad imperative for the profession, it is simply not correct. Harris and I, among others, may passionately believe that this is a legitimate calling for us, as individuals, and collectively as a profession. But this is and must be a matter of personal choice. I state this repeatedly in my writings on this topic, and I am disappointed that I did not make this point clear enough to avoid misunderstanding.

This distinction between a personal choice and a professional obligation is critical. What I argue is that following the call of justice is an acceptable approach to meeting our obligations to our employers and to society more broadly. To argue that this is an obligation for *all* archivists would undermine the entire premise of my concern for social justice. We must allow, accept, and even celebrate our own diversity of opinion.

This choice cannot be enforced or imposed on individual archivists. Yet it seems to me legitimate to call on the profession as a whole, or its constituent professional societies (such as SAA), to take a stand, when called upon, in support of the goals of democratic accountability, inclusiveness, open government, and social justice. I agree that this more limited appeal is open for debate and contestation within the archival profession. But we should not conflate the broader question of the profession's role in society with the specific roles that each archivist plays within a particular institutional and social context. Greene

states: "I do not think we can demand or even expect a social justice ethos of archival practitioners any more than we can demand or even expect donation of private *fonds* to public repositories" (p. 327). I fully agree. This is what I have argued. Each of us must wrestle with our conscience, personal values, and employment situation in making such choices.

Politicizing the Archival Profession

The second central critique Greene presents is that following a social justice approach to archives would politicize the archival profession. He argues that pursuing social justice "risks overly politicizing and ultimately damaging the archival profession" and that "such an alteration of archival goals risks weakening both our ethical standing and our power" (p. 303). This is, in fact, a perspective that I shared until a few years ago.

The problem is not politicizing archives. Rather, it is not recognizing that archives have always been politicized as centers of power within society. Through most of human history, archives have served the needs and interests of the rich and powerful. What the call of justice asks archivists to accept is a responsibility to level the playing field. The archival profession as a whole—but not necessarily each individual archivist or repository—should assume a responsibility to document and serve all groups within society. Meeting this responsibility will strengthen rather than weaken our profession's ethical standing and power.

Greene quotes my remarks to the U.K. Society of Archivists in 2009 that "the archival profession should actively engage the political issues of our times" (p. 308). However, he then interprets my statement about "political issues" to mean "engaging broadly in politics," which he contends makes no sense when applied to archivists (p. 308).

By "political issues" I mean concerns such as democratic accountability, open government, diversity, access to information, and related issues.[4] This is not the same as "politics," which to me means such things as electoral campaigns, partisan issues, and the like. I would not encourage archivists—except as individual citizens apart from their professional activities—to engage in such forms of politics.

Responding to the call of justice is a political act, but not politics. The work of archivists has always taken place in a political context, even though this was not overtly acknowledged or recognized. As Terry Cook stated, "This is not politics as in left wing or right wing, liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat, but politics as engagement, as committing the archives to societal interventions for justice rather than curatorial passivity under the guise (and illusion) of professional neutrality."[5]

Within his discussion of politicizing archives, Greene raises a complicated issue regarding the archivist's responsibilities within an oppressive political

regime. He cites Christopher Hurley's charge that Nazi recordkeeping cannot be divorced from its use in operating the gas chambers, then counterpoises this with examples of records of oppressive regimes that were later used for accountability or restitution, such as the Stasi files and records of the Cambodian genocide. "A difficult assessment must be made about whether it is more important to sabotage the records of injustice or to ensure that reliable records of injustice exist to be used by the just," he states (p. 306).

For me this assessment is not difficult at all. Given a choice in a matter of life or death, I cannot imagine an ethical justification for *not* preventing atrocities from being committed. The power of archival records for redemptive justice pales in comparison to the potential opportunity to prevent injustice from occurring.

Greene recognizes the paradox that "it is often the same set of records that serves at once to maintain a repressive regime and to hold that regime accountable" (p. 319), but claims that Harris and I do not "clearly confront the paradox" (p. 321). In fact, I do accept this paradox, as I think my writings illustrate. The gas chambers example would be an extreme situation, one that archivists would rarely encounter. But in such instances, as Verne Harris demonstrated by blowing the whistle when the South African apartheid regime began illegally destroying its records, an archivist must choose whether to become a whistleblower or a saboteur, or to continue quietly processing and creating finding aids for the residue of documentation. I hope I would have the courage to take action in such a situation.

Objectivity vs. Neutrality

The third key critique Greene presents is his disagreement with (in his words) my "call to abandon any pretense of neutrality" while still "sustaining some meaningful form of objectivity" (p. 311). He correctly states that I believe that archivists "should strive for the latter but must abandon the former." Greene takes the opposite view: that objectivity is impossible but archivists should strive to be neutral.

As evidence that objectivity is a "chimera," he presents the fact that equally logical historians can reach "radically opposite theses about the same facts" (p. 311). In this, I believe, he mistakenly conflates objectivity—which is a form of methodology or guidelines for behavior—with truth claims. I am not contending that objective Truth (to use Sir Hilary Jenkinson's capitalization) is possible, only that objective and honest thinking, within a methodology of archival (or historical) practice, provides necessary standards of professional responsibility. Without such rules, we would in effect be playing tennis with the net down.

Without the goal of neutrality, Greene argues, "archivists and their institutions will become completely politicized, the stalking horses or pawns of every stripe of partisan effort" (p. 312). In seeking to document marginalized peoples, I am willing to accept the risk of partisanship. If archivists act honestly, following standards of professional objectivity as outlined by Thomas Haskell and others, they may choose to give voice to such alternative perspectives. My hope is that enough archivists will choose such a path to give all groups in society a voice, rather than to sweep aside divergent views. Not every archivist will do so. It is not necessary—and certainly not *required*—that they do so. But as long as it remains a viable and professionally acceptable option, we will all be the better for having the widest possible diversity of documentary perspectives on our society.

In explaining his commitment to the goal of neutrality, Greene approvingly quotes Kathy Marquis, who calls on archivists to be "honest brokers" (p. 312). I agree with this, to a point. The concept of professional objectivity stipulates that archivists should seek to accommodate all ideological perspectives in our collective holdings. Yet this does not mean that *every* repository must present neutral ground. Some community archives seeking to document underrepresented social groups—including GLBTs, racial and ethnic minorities, even ultraconservatives—understandably do not trust mainstream repositories to present their stories properly or fully.[6] I argue that, in such cases, a community may legitimately "own" its own history, its own archival record, without seeking to create a "neutral" environment. Objectivity in methodology and professional standards should be employed, but self-documentation and even partisanship may be necessary to ensure preservation of culturally sensitive or confidential information.

In such a situation, it is appropriate and acceptable, I believe, to seek a level playing field by employing an archival equivalent of affirmative action. Such efforts may not be neutral, but an activist approach may be needed to ensure that archives and their holdings—collectively if not individually—represent the full spectrum of opinion and experience in society.

For example, when I became the first professional archivist at the University of Connecticut, I inherited a large body of historical business records the library had acquired. These were valuable in documenting the state's economic history. But to provide a more complete representation of this topic, I initiated a grant-funded project to develop a Connecticut labor archives. This is the type of "affirmative archives" approach common among many manuscript collecting repositories.

Greene worries—rightly I think—that such intervention by archivists may appear to be "taking sides" and thus hinder one's "ability to acquire materials from the other side" (p. 317).[7] The Desegregation of Virginia Education (DOVE) project archivists, for example, acknowledge this problem (p. 317). Yet they accept it as the necessary cost of gaining trust from victims of discrimination

who understandably do not trust the same white institutions that once fostered segregation. Although many collecting repository archives will seek to document all sides of a controversial issue, it is not necessary for all to do so. One way to ensure diversity in the archival record may, in fact, be to allow each community of interest or background to document its own activities and heritage. Allowing all voices to be heard can mitigate the inherent biases of such an approach, without trying to establish a single standardized approach to archival selection or appraisal.

This brings us to another of Greene's central points regarding objectivity and neutrality. Although he correctly worries that an activist approach to collection development might jeopardize the archivist's ability to acquire documents from different ends of the political or ideological spectrum, he then argues that "the social justice imperative . . . would almost certainly result in the acquisition and preservation only of records with a clear social justice purpose" (p. 317). "Keep in mind that the social justice imperative is presented as an ethical mandate, rather than as an acquisition choice" (p. 318). Those are Greene's words, not mine. I have always presented this as a choice rather than a requirement. If I have not inserted such a disclaimer in every sentence of my writings, I have nonetheless tried to make this distinction clear. Even if I did advocate that all archivists should follow the same path in acquisitions, though, I would argue that social justice is not truly a category of records but rather an attitude or set of principles and methods for achieving a more balanced and diverse documentation of society in all its complexity.

This concern, however, leads Greene to follow "the overarching logic" (p. 318) of what he presumes to be my position to its supposed ultimate end, which "might include pressure to deaccession or destroy records that are somehow antithetical to social justice pursuits" (p. 318). This is *reductio ad absurdum*. No one that I know has ever suggested a mode of behavior that would countenance such action. If anything, I and others have argued for opening the archives to all points of view, all types of documentation. For example, when the government of Hungary proposed to remove and destroy secret police records—which Greene cites as an example of this danger—I was one of many archivists to speak out in opposition.

I do not wish to tell any archivist or repository how to make decisions about selection, appraisal, description, or reference service. Each repository should establish its own collecting program, whether it is for a single institution or a broader geographical or topical focus. All I ask is that archivists be allowed, if they choose, to apply considerations of accountability, diversity, and social justice as they shape their own approaches to the important work they undertake. For me, this is not a matter of rejecting neutrality as a goal but of

recognizing that we cannot achieve it. We deceive ourselves, our donors, our researchers, and our employers by pretending otherwise.

Institutional or Societal Mission

This issue leads to Greene's fourth important critique, that "tension, confusion, paradox, or flat-out contradiction in understanding both the role of records and the role of archivists is part and parcel of the call to a social justice agenda" (p. 305). As he correctly states, the archival profession continues to debate "whether the archival mission is societal or institutional" (p. 314). His concern is that "the ethics of social justice will tend to undercut the individuality of repository missions" and foreclose that debate (p. 319). He contends that my support for social justice leaves archivists for private institutions "at best in ethical limbo" if they cannot actively pursue social justice (p. 315).

These concerns arise, I think, from the central misunderstanding underlying much of Greene's critique: that I and others demand that all archivists follow the call of justice. There is no "social justice agenda." If this were indeed a mandate, rather than an invitation to choose such a path, I would concur with Greene's critique on these points. However, the confusion and contradiction that trouble him result from this misreading of my argument. It is a mistake for which I take partial responsibility. Although I have stated repeatedly, particularly in *Archives Power*, that I do not expect every archivist to respond to the call of justice, many of my comments regarding ethics and social responsibility do not come with explicit repetitions of such a qualification.

As to whether the archival mission is institutional or societal, that is simply a false dichotomy. Collectively, as a profession, our mission is both. Individually, at the repository level, my response is: it depends. Some archives serve only a single institution. Others serve only a broader societal purpose. Many, such as the University of Connecticut's former Historical Manuscripts and Archives Department where I spent nearly half of my professional career, serve both purposes.

If there is any confusion about the role of archivists, it comes from those who do not recognize or accept the multiple roles that we play, the variety of stakeholders we serve, and the diversity within our professional calling. I know that Greene recognizes all of this. I simply want to reassure him that I also accept—and even celebrate—these diverse roles. There is nothing in my writings to suggest that archivists need to abandon their repositories' distinct individual missions.

Greene's concern about the "ethical limbo" of institutional archivists seems to arise from writings by Richard Cox and others who are not identified as advocates of a social justice role for archives. Greene contends that the social justice

"mandate" reinforces the "pernicious argument" that corporate archivists—and even religious or private university archivists—cannot be ethical because they do not serve the public (pp. 313). Cox did make such allegations in a letter to the editor of *The American Archivist*. Although Greene recognizes that I clearly reject such "wholesale critique" of corporate archivists (p. 315), he still conflates Cox's diatribe with the argument for social justice (p. 314).

In fact, as president of SAA in 2005 when Cox's inflammatory diatribe appeared, I coauthored a strong rebuttal. I have repeatedly stated that archivists serving corporate, religious, tribal, and other private institutions may be constrained from following much of my recommendation for responding to the call of justice. But I have never questioned their right to do so, nor their ethical standing within the profession.

There is another point on which I must not have stated my opinions clearly. Greene interprets my comments urging "some level of access to [corporate] historical records pertaining to societal concerns" (my words) as a demand for, in his words, "socialization of property" (p. 315). My own position, however clumsily stated, is quite close to that espoused by Greene. Private property should be respected, but in the interests of society, archivists should encourage their institutions to provide public access to their archives, particularly when matters of public health, safety, or security may be at stake. In cases such as the "cigarette papers," the 2010 BP oil spill, Enron, the Pentagon Papers, and even perhaps the recent WikiLeaks incident, public interests should trump institutional secrecy. This is not an attempt to socialize private property, but to ensure the public good.

Archivists' Role in Society

The final critique that I think requires a response regards Greene's concerns about the implications of my argument for redefining the role of archivists in society. "Ultimately, Jimerson is staking out moral and ethical boundaries for the profession," he states. He then asks, how does one "manage to respect or admire professionals one has deemed immoral or unethical?" (p. 323). He implies that I believe that social justice should be "the end of all archival effort" (p. 323) and that archivists' "only truly significant role in society is a social justice role" (p. 324).

To the extent that I seek to stake out ethical boundaries, my argument has been to *expand* our concept of professional ethics to include—not to exclude—perspectives such as the call of justice. Far from deeming anyone "immoral or unethical" for not agreeing with me, I strongly defend the rights of colleagues to choose a different path. In any event, many archivists will be constrained from following my suggestions by their institutional obligations, workloads, or personal values. I respect and support such choices.

As evidence of my disdain for archivists who do not espouse a social justice perspective, Greene cites my reference to Uriah Heep (pp. 311, 323). However, my comparison states that archivists who accept a *passive* role as handmaidens to history remind me of the obsequious Dickens character. This has nothing to do with not accepting a social justice perspective, but with passivity and self-effacement.

A social justice perspective is clearly not, in my view, the only significant role of archivists. Indeed, I agree with most of what Greene presents in his conclusion regarding the important roles archivists play. The subtitle of *Archives Power*—and the substance of its contents—presents memory, accountability, and social justice as three of many important roles for the archival profession. It is no accident that social justice comes *after* memory and accountability.

Instead of the pursuit of social justice, Greene argues, "our mandates come to the same thing, in the end: service to our users, however our institutions define them" (p. 325). Although I agree in principle with his focus on users, I argue that we must balance our responsibilities to our employers, our donors (or institutional staff), and our users. Beyond that, I believe that archivists—as a profession and, to a greater or lesser degree, as individuals—also have some responsibility to society. As professionals who help to give shape to our collective cultural heritage, archivists must accept some societal responsibilities in addition to our institutional recordkeeping duties.

If we are to meet our potential to provide societal benefits, we should (when possible for each of us, according to our individual "lights" or consciences) consider the extent to which what we do can make a difference for the social good. I do not ask, as Greene suggests, that archivists have a responsibility "to lead the social justice crusade" (p. 328). But the examples and arguments he makes for the role of archivists in "meaning-making and in individual, organizational, and social memory" (p. 327) are all statements with which I concur. That is in fact much of the substance of *Archives Power*. To me this requires acknowledging some level of social responsibility, as the *Core Values of Archivists* statement recognizes.[8]

Concluding Thoughts

Mark Greene has provided a thought-provoking and challenging argument regarding the role of archives and archivists. In trying to clarify my own thinking on these important matters in response to his critique of my own writings, I do not in any way mean to denigrate his views or suggest that he deliberately misrepresents my own. He raises important questions that we as a profession need to consider.

Before concluding, I want to make one point very strongly. This is not a debate with only two sides, not an argument limited to two authors. My hope—and it is the hope with which I began to present my arguments regarding archives and social justice in 2005—is that we can engage in a lively debate, with many voices, regarding the role of archives and archivists in society. On the question of social justice, there are nearly as many perspectives as there are archivists or people interested in archives.[9] I strongly encourage others to enter the discussion, either through letters to the editor (such as Michelle Caswell contributes in this issue), in an online discussion forum, in future conference papers (national, regional, or local), or in published articles.

I reiterate my hope for the future of archives. For me, the archival profession should be multidimensional as well as multicultural. We should care about documenting the poor as much as the rich; neo-Nazis as much as racial and ethnic minorities; homophobes as much as gays and lesbians; liberals as much as conservatives. America's archives should represent all of us—in our imperfections, in our daily lives, in our struggles to be human and humane in a world fraught with temptations, dangers, and tragedies, as well as with love, hope, laughter, and joy.

As archivists, we must fulfill our responsibilities to our employers, our donors, our researchers, our communities, and our colleagues. In doing so—whatever our personal values may be—we should accept and follow our "core values" as a profession. First among these, alphabetically and symbolically, is Access and Use. Our values also include Accountability, Advocacy, Diversity, History and Memory, Preservation, Responsible Custody, Selection, and Service. Alphabetically last, but for me one of the most important, is Social Responsibility. As Terry Cook wrote, "Archives are about memory, continuity, linkages, community, heritage, humanity—about allowing the solace of remembering and the balm of forgetting to move the spirit, to open us evermore sensitively to the possibilities of justice."[10]

I do not expect everyone to agree with me, but I hope we can continue this discussion of our values, our ethics, our multiple responsibilities, and our important role in society. Beyond the clamor of daily deadlines, unending work backlogs, and technical challenges of the digital age, I hope we can listen to our inner voices urging us to public service—however we define it—and to the cause of promoting and defending the important documentation entrusted to our care. To me this is a high calling, one worthy of a profession with an important purpose.

Notes

[1] I gladly echo the compliments Mark Greene pays me in his essay. Although I would have hoped my arguments would convince someone of his intellectual stature, passionate commitment to the profession, and credentials as an activist archivist, I am glad to engage in this discussion with a good friend whom I greatly admire.

[2] Mark A. Greene, "A Critique of Social Justice as an Archival Imperative; What *Is* It We're Doing That's All That Important?," 302. For simplicity further citations to Greene's draft essay will be presented as page numbers in parentheses within the body of the text.

[3] In the post-9/11 era, use of the term "crusade" is particularly unfortunate. As we used to say on the playground, "them's fightin' words"—and not only for Muslims.

[4] In fact, Greene states in an earlier endnote: "As a profession, though not necessarily as individual practitioners, archivists in democratic nations do have a mission to advocate on behalf of democratic accountability" (n. 7). I entirely agree. This is part of social justice. I am not suggesting that individual archivists *must* support such causes, but that that they *may* do so within the bounds of professional ethics.

[5] Terry Cook, "Archival Music: Verne Harris and the Cracks of Memory," in Verne Harris, *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2007), xiii–xiv.

[6] For examples, see the essays in Jeannette A. Bastian and Ben Alexander, eds., *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory* (London: Facet Publishing, 2009).

[7] An apparent corollary to this concern is that archivists seeking to represent minority voices might "perforce be driven to document . . . the power status quo" (p. 311). In fact, to me this is not a problem but a logical necessity. Archivists should document all sectors of the political or economic spectrum, as I have repeatedly argued. My point is that the traditionally recognized powerful groups are overrepresented in archival documentation. The call of justice asks those who accept it to seek a more balanced representation of all societal groups, if possible.

[8] Although, as Greene points out, the *SAA Code of Ethics* does not outline a social responsibility for archivists, the *Core Values of Archivists* does list "Social Responsibility" as one of its eleven values statements. The *Core Values* grew from Mark Greene's seminal 2008 SAA presidential address, although he did not identify social responsibility as one of his ten proposed values. In the interest of full disclosure, I cochaired the task force that added social responsibility when it proposed the *Core Values* statement, which SAA Council approved (with some modifications) in 2011.

[9] My own views, for example, have developed in response to writings by numerous individuals, as cited in my footnotes; I am not the leading proponent of these ideas, simply the closest target for Greene's arrows.

[10] Cook, "Archival Music: Verne Harris and the Cracks of Memory," xiii–xiv.

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