

# THE FORM AND FUNCTION OF ARCHIVAL THEORY

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*The study of archives in the United States is still very new. State archival programs did not appear until the early 1900s and the National Archives was not founded until 1934. Much of the first few decades of archival practice saw a focus on purely practical concerns. Now that widely accepted principles are in place, some archivists are beginning to wax philosophical and to explore the function of the archivist in society and in the preservation of history. Not everyone agrees that this is a good idea. Some archivists have written that this kind of theorizing is distracting and unnecessary.*

*This paper examines a recent debate on archival theory. Various viewpoints are discussed and the question as to whether archivists should be “educated” or “trained” is addressed. It is argued that archivists—both in the field and in academia—need to be wary of the dangers of growing stagnant and lagging behind the rest of society. In order for the archives to continue to grow and to maintain their important role in society, theoretical exploration and experimentation is necessary. Archival theory is not a luxury, it is a necessity.*

This is an exciting time to study archives in America. The National Archives and many state archives have been in place for such a short time that they have had little time to develop their own theories and identities. It is only recently that American archivists have begun to look outside the practice of archives to the greater laws of society and human nature that affect their profession. Yet this type of exploration is not without controversy. Some have argued that it is not the place of the archivist to devote his or her attention to these ideas that do not immediately affect the working archivist. Others insist that unless attention is given to such concerns American archival practice will stagnate as the rest

of society moves forward. This paper will address both of these views and then examine two current examples of archival theory. Through a review of selected literature on archival theory it will become clear that theorizing is not a luxury but a necessity. Archives do not exist in a vacuum. They are an integral part of a society and of that society’s view of itself. These types of social (as well as political, psychological, historical, etc.) concerns must be explored if archives are to remain a relevant institution.

With the publication of his 1981 article “The future course of archival theory in the United States,” Frank Burke began a debate which has raged among American archivists over the last fifteen years. Indeed, the article has been cited and discussed nearly every year since its publication. Given this attention, it is not surprising that the ideas presented in the article have been a source of great contention. The scope of an archival theory is not only difficult to agree on, but some have argued that theorizing is itself unnecessary. Before these detractors are addressed, it is first important to understand the basic idea of archival theory as it is presented by Burke.

Vocabulary is important in these kinds of discussions. Burke looks to a political scientist, Samuel H. Beer, for his definition of theory as “the development of universal laws, and, if such laws are universal and immutable, they must be applicable on all occasions, regardless of time or place” (cited in Burke, 1981, p. 40). Universal laws are developed in the abstract as opposed to more practical laws which come about through the gathering of empirical evidence. An example of more practical laws would be the archival principles of provenance or *respect des fonds*—rules that have been proven to work. It is important to note, writes

Burke, that these principles “are limited in their applications to certain types of records in certain types of institutions” and “they are all of European derivation” (p. 40). Burke then is concerned only with “universal laws” as they are developed and applied in the United States.

But what of the renowned American archivists—Theodore Schellenberg, Ernst Posner, and others? Do they not write of universal laws? Not according to Burke. The majority of their writings are reflections of practice, not developments of theory. As an example, Burke (1981) refers to Oliver Wendell Holmes’s article on the five levels of arrangement, writing that it “was not the clarion call of some new theoretical concept, but rather the synthesis of current usage in the National Archives” (p. 41). The first generation of American archivists seems to have been largely concerned with practical matters. This is understandable considering the magnitude of their tasks, and an archivist under pressure to process and plan for a great amount of material is not likely to find the time or inclination for purely academic pursuits. The kind of philosophizing called for by Burke is not immediately relevant to the working archivist. More practical daily use is found instead in the guidelines that govern appraisal, arrangement, and description. But Burke is calling for something much more expansive; not more discussion of the care of records, but of the “nature of man and man’s record of himself” (p. 42).

“What, then, is there to theorize about?” (p. 42) becomes an essential question. If archival theory is not about the practice of archives, what could it possibly entail? This is an important question and makes it easy to see where some of the criticisms of Burke’s article may begin. If archival theory is not something that will be of use to working archivists—rather, if archives in America have made it this far without said “universal rules”—the necessity of these theories may be called into question. What is there to theorize about? Burke’s answer, of course, is: plenty. Although he gives several examples of areas in which archival theory can expand and grow, the focus of Burke’s suggestions can be seen in a selection of the many questions he asks. Burke writes, “What is it within the nature of society that makes it create the records it does? . . . What are the facts and how do they affect interpretations? . . . [S]hould the archivist be concerned that what he is preserving is truth, or just evidence? . . . [W]hat is there in human nature that stirs an impulse to revere artifacts? . . . [W]hat is the difference between information and the medium on which that information has been inscribed?” (pp. 42-43).

These are important questions that demand to be addressed, but they do not yet seem essential. They do not ask how archivists go about their work; these questions ask why.

Burke does not suggest that archivists ponder these and other lofty questions as they go about their daily routine. It is clear that many archivist’s schedules allow little room for philosophical activities, and the nature of their work may prevent their achieving the level of detachment necessary when looking at the “big picture.”

Burke writes, “Theory can only grow in the cool and contemplative conditions of the cloister, i.e., in the classroom and its concomitant academic setting” (p. 42). In the classroom, scholars are able to achieve the detachment conducive to the formulation of universal laws. It is then left to the working archivist to test the theories they develop.

Burke argues that the archive courses being taught today consist of “archival training under the guise of archival education. Students are taught what and how, but not why” (pp. 44-45). Today’s archival training is held in contrast to the work of history departments which “are looking for rationales, for basic concepts, for means of fitting the archivist into the warp and woof of society, for the *theory* behind the practice. They are there to educate, not to train” (p. 45). The distinction is clear, but the next step is much less so. It does not appear that Burke is suggesting that archives sacrifice training in favor of theory. One would think that a possible solution might be found in a combination of the two, yet Burke seems to treat training and education as if they were inherently opposed to each other. Whether or not this is true, Burke has made quite clear his call for the need of education, of universal laws, and of archival theory as a means of better understanding and ultimately practicing within the field of archives.

The most outspoken and amusing critic of Burke’s article, and of archival theory in general, is John Roberts, whose articles “Archival theory: Much ado about shelving” and “Archival theory: Myth or banality?” appeared in *American Archivist* in 1987 and 1990, respectively. Roberts examines what he believes to be the reasoning behind this call for theorizing and comes to the conclusion that archival theory as defined by Burke is distracting and unnecessary. As regards the myriad questions Burke poses to future theorists, Roberts (1990) simply writes that “[i]t seems unlikely that such questions would yield much to advance archival work” (p. 117).

Roberts attempts to clarify his own concept of theory by separating it into two different modes. The

first deals with the practical laws of the profession—those principles that Burke refused to include in his view of theory. “This certainly is theory,” Roberts writes, “but only in a vocational sense” (1987, p. 68). The second mode of the theory does look outside the practical aspects of the work, but Roberts argues that this is not the place for the archivist. “The second strain of archival theory does address larger questions—but are they archival questions? In a way, this type of theory can be seen as applied historiography” (p. 69). This is how he makes the distinction. There is vocational theory and there is historiography. Archival theory, according to Roberts, does not fall in between the two, it does not exist at all.

Roberts argues that Burke has confused the role of the archivist with that of the historian. Questions that deal with such topics as the nature of records and the idea of truth or evidence belong solely in history departments, not in the archives. It is suggested that the cry for an archival theory stemmed from the desire of some archivists to become more like historians—i.e., to be part of a field that is more respected in academia. “These calls for developing a body of archival theory may derive less from an objective need for more archival theory,” Roberts writes, “than from an emotional need for greater professional acceptance” (1987, p. 67). He restates the same idea more strongly in his later article, writing, “interest in archival theory may be an outgrowth of the archival profession’s colossal inferiority complex” (1990, p. 119). Whether or not archivists are respected as professionals or foster feelings of inferiority are not matters that belong in this discussion. What is curious is that what came from Burke as a cry for introspection was read by Roberts as a simple plea for attention.

Throughout both of his articles Roberts seeks to portray archival work as easy and uncomplicated and thus in need of no theory. He writes of “the easily mastered procedures of archival work” and, that theory “over complicates that which is simple” (1990, p. 110). It is strange to read a professional who speaks so disparagingly of his own field. Even if the practice of archives is as simple as Roberts presents it to be, that does not necessarily rule out the need for more theoretical work. The practice of most religions may seem simple—love your neighbor, be true to your god, and lead a happy and eternal life—yet theologians engage in no end of theorizing. They are constantly examining or reexamining the most intricate of ideas, the effects of which will probably never be felt by common practitioners. Perhaps it is a far stretch to compare the study of ar-

chives with religious practice, but the point remains: behind those ideas that seem so simple may lie the most fertile grounds for thought and interpretation.

Despite his comments regarding the ease of archival work, nearly all of Roberts’ criticisms are from the vantage point of the working archivist. He is looking for practical applications in theories that have none. Roberts clearly has no interest in universal laws, he is concerned only with those guidelines that can help him in the day-to-day activities of his job. He argues that theory is useless because “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” (Roberts, 1990, p. 112). This bias is even more obvious when Roberts writes that theory “will not help archivists cope with researchers who refuse to put documents back into their proper folders” (p. 118). Roberts can be held up as a perfect example of why a working archivist is little prepared to ponder the theoretical.<sup>1</sup> He is too concerned with practical matters and not able to remove himself far enough from the rigors of the job to look at it with new eyes. His impatience shows in his writing as he comes to the petulant conclusion that “we save what is historically valuable—*there*; that is the theory” (Roberts, 1987, p. 70). The working archivist can accept that answer and move on. But to the archivist, to the historian, to the philosopher, who wishes to dig deeper, the next step is clear—to ponder why it is historically valuable.

The question of archival theory, then, is not one that can be easily resolved. To answer the wide-ranging questions posed by Burke, an army of archivists would have to call on every academic field from physics to philology and devote all of their waking hours to the task. While a more theoretical view of the profession may be in order, it need not pursue every avenue of thought. Roberts’ responses to this idea, however, are inadequate. They do not address the issues raised by Burke, they only treat the basic concept and do so in a skittish and haphazard manner. Roberts does not take time to consider what an archivist is; his concern (understandably so) is with what an archivist does. If archival theory is necessary and can be of use to the field, to what extent should it be employed? Not with the myopic fervor of Burke, but certainly more than the practical bent of Roberts. It is necessary to look at arguments that address this issue with more of an eye toward compromise.

One of the most immediate responses to Burke’s article was Cappon’s “What, then, is there to theorize about?” which appeared in 1982. Cappon expresses

concern that theorizing of the kind proposed by Burke will compromise the primary function to the archivist—i.e., a keeper of the records. In this sense, Cappon echoes Roberts' belief that it is not a good idea for archivists to roam into the realm of the historian. Cappon quotes Hilary Jenkinson who wrote emphatically that "the Archivist is not, and ought not to be, an Historian" (p. 22).

Cappon takes a careful look at Burke's division of theory into practical (or vocational) principles and universal (or theoretical) laws. Those guiding principles that are summarily dismissed by Burke are in fact the bedrock of the profession of archives—they are the theory, argues Cappon. He writes that "theory embraces principles. Overarching archival principles emerged empirically, and from them specific rules have been shaped and modified for administering the records . . ." (p. 21). This is an important point because Cappon considers not what theory is, but what are the results of theory. These ideas that are now taken for granted by archivists were surely, at one time, only components of larger theories that probed such conundrums as the meaning and importance of the keeping of records. The principle of *respect des fonds* was not born with the first clay tablets, it developed slowly and *theoretically* over time.

In his 1985 article, "The Burke-Cappon debate: Some further criticisms and considerations for archival theory," Kimball expands upon Cappon's ideas that from theory would grow (or has grown) the principles that govern archives. Kimball examines the history of archives in Europe and how basic principles were developed there. He writes that the reason some American archivists have a difficult time accepting the historical and theoretical development of the principles is because they played no part in their formation. By the time American archival programs were founded, the European systems upon which they were based were already firmly in place. He writes, "because [American] archivists still operate in the context of the European tradition of provenance, they find it difficult to view this archival theory as part of a historiographical tradition . . . Unfortunately, this ignores a great deal of the European archival heritage and the distinct possibility that other methods of organizing knowledge exist" (p. 375).

There is, according to Cappon, such a thing as "archival truth" and this is distinguished from a "historical truth." The very idea of truth is in danger of being compromised, Cappon argues, by the kinds of questions posed by Burke. Burke's questions fall outside the realm of the archivist because "the concern is with not the

substance of the texts, but, rather, the genuine origin and continuous preservation of the records. This truth is the essence of archival theory" (Cappon, 1982, p. 20). Ultimately, then, Burke's ideas fall outside of this realm of truth and "pertain not to archival theory but to cultural issues derived from evaluation of the records, an act of historical interpretation" (p. 24). It is a genuine concern that the archivist could become so lost in philosophizing that he or she would lose track of his or her primary responsibility—i.e., to care for the records. Cappon argues that this is why the archives must remain separate from history. When historical interpretation creeps into the archives, there looms a danger of compromising the integrity of the records (p. 25).

Cappon does not disqualify the use and importance of archival theory, as does Roberts. Rather, he suggests that it be approached more conservatively than Burke has argued. For archivists to dive wholly into deep abstraction would indeed pose the danger of changes coming too fast to the possible detriment of the records. It is necessary to allow for the development of new principles, but they must be tried and tested over time. However, these new principles will not appear, and the field of archives will not move forward, without consistent attention given to archival theory.

A large part of the discussions addressed above seem to dwell on the question of whether or not archivists should dabble in the field of historiography. This is not surprising, considering that many archivists have backgrounds in history. It is only natural that they look toward their expertise. However, now that many new archivists are coming from the library field, a new role for the archivist is postulated—that of the information specialist. Stielow, in his 1991 article "Archival theory redux and redeemed: Definition and context toward a general theory," writes that archivists are "intermediaries in the archival information process and the continuum between their sources and users" (p. 26). This is important to the development of archival theory because it frees the archivist from the constraints of the roles of "applied historian" or "keeper of the record." Stielow proclaims archives a metadiscipline: "It provides services at a level above (meta) specific issues or disciplines and [its] theory is synthetic and expansive, embracing elements from both the humanities and science" (p. 21). This view of the archives is liberating. It frees the archivist to theorize and explore beyond his or her traditional role.

The view of hypothesis and experimentation presented by Stielow is likewise more in line with the social sciences. Stielow looks to William James' (1963)

essay on Pragmatism as a way of justifying the necessity of theoretical exploration. James writes that theories are to be used as “indicators of the ways in which existing realities may be changed” and that they then become instruments to bring about these changes (cited in Stielow, 1991, p. 23).

Stielow argues that change is necessary for the simple reasons that “archives and manuscript repositories are not perfect and that time does not stand still” (p. 26). There will always be room for improvement, for the development of new principles and ideas. This progress can be more readily achieved through the continuous creation and trial of new information models and hypotheses. An example of this kind of experimentation can be found outside of the field archivists had been most likely to turn toward, history, and in newer interdisciplinary fields such as information and library science.

Many different definitions of theory are given and discussed above. Indeed, much of a debate such as this is spent defining, clarifying, and redefining vocabulary. Each author has his or her own, developed or adapted to fit whatever argument he or she is making at the time. In order to address some of the ideas presented above and before recent examples of archival theory can be examined, it is necessary to arrive at a conception of theory that serves the purpose of this paper.

Rules tell how things should be done; theories inquire why. Theories are free from the constraints of what is possible or even real. They do not present answers, only explore ideas and thus find few fans in the literal or practical minded. A theory is not an explanation, justification, or condemnation; it is purely an exploration. It is what prevents us from growing stagnant and dull. Stielow (1991) writes that “such theory formulation implies that human beings, who created the institution and its practices, have the power to alter directions” (p. 23). Yet we never will alter directions unless we spend time considering which way they should lead. This is what is meant by theory. It is a way of examining why we do what we do and making way for the possibility of change. Archival theory is not a revolutionary or even a controversial concept.

Many archivists probably engage in a sort of theorizing on certain drowsy Monday mornings when they must convince themselves why it is they must go in to work. All that is suggested is that this be taken to a more formal level and presented in a manner for all to consider. Theory is not a threat to the archives, it is a necessity.

So what does archival theory look like? Many articles have appeared in recent years which seem to fit into the model of archival theory as proposed by Burke. As to whether the authors wrote as a response to Burke's call or as a natural outgrowth of the profession is not important. They are significant because they are taking an important step toward establishing a theoretical base for the archives in America. It is interesting to note that the authors of both of the articles that will be discussed here come from academia: one a student in a Master of Archival Studies Program, another a professor of Geography.

The social function of the archivist and its effect on appraisal is examined in Schaeffer's 1992 article “Transcendent concepts: Power, appraisal, and the archivist as ‘social outcast.’” Schaeffer points out that while the importance of archival appraisal is never called into question, “this perception of the critical importance of appraisal has not been joined by an analysis of its justification or intellectual content” (p. 609). Discussion has, instead, focused only on “methodology.” By now, this is a familiar argument. However, Schaeffer goes beyond this mere call for analysis and explores the reasons why appraisal has been so little examined and what this kind of discussion could mean for the archives.

The questions raised by appraisal are ultimately those of values. Roberts (1987) agrees that “we save what is historically valuable” (p. 70). But the question is, what values are used and to whom do they belong? Schaeffer (1992) asks, “are they to be the values of the records creator, the user or the archivist?” (p. 610). They answer that he ultimately arrives at is that “the values that began to be applied were those of the most valued user, the historian, and the skills and values of the archivist became those of the modern historian” (p. 611). These values, however, began to wane as many different groups began to demand access to the archives. The development of records management in the United States served as an important intermediary between the user and the archivist and helped to standardize many basic appraisal decisions. While the values of the historian remain close to the archivist, they no longer dominate the field as they once did. The practice and study of archives has grown significantly more complex. Schaeffer writes, “it would appear that the values to be applied are the highly heterogeneous values of society as a whole” (p. 614).

With this heady new responsibility to “society as a whole,” the archivist assumes the lofty role of “social servant” with “a duty to the world community in the

protection of its rights, its ability to understand and assess the functioning of its institutions, and ultimately its ability to understand its own evolution in a comprehensive historical context" (Schaeffer, 1992, p. 615). The act of appraisal then becomes a "social action" (p. 615). This may not have a profound effect on the day-to-day activities of the archivist, but that is not what this is about. It will be necessary to look at appraisal in light of its social implications in order to better understand the function and role of the archivist. This understanding may then lead to the formulation of new principles which will make their way to the working archivist.

Schaeffer writes that "where archivists may have betrayed their social responsibilities is not in the assumption of an unsanctioned role in appraisal but in embracing that role without accepting the attendant responsibility to develop and define the conceptual base for their actions" (p. 617). This is, in a sense, a reversal of the way in which the archives had previously been studied. Earlier writings always began with the records: what are they? which ones should we keep? and how should we arrange them? Even the establishment of records management looked at agencies only as record-creating bodies, not social organizations. Schaeffer is proposing a step back to gain perspective and perhaps new knowledge on the social function of the archives. Will this lead to great changes in the way things are done? Most likely it will not; but the sort of inquiry and understanding that it will promote can only be good for the archives.

In another recent article, "To remember and forget: Archives, memory, and culture," Foote (1990) examines the archives in a social context, specifically as a function of society's "collective memory." He writes that "individuals and organizations act *collectively* to maintain records of the past" and that "*memory* may even be said to reside in the institutional mission of organizations such as archives, museums, universities, some government agencies, and the like" (p. 380). As such, it is difficult to isolate the role of the archives from these other institutions. Together they combine to preserve what society has deemed important. In order for archives to maintain an important role in this collective memory, it is necessary to determine where they belong in relation to these other organizations and ideas.

Foote (1990) explores an interesting phenomenon in the collective memory of cultures—the act of forgetting. In a field such as archives which is founded on the idea of preserving the historic record, the idea of effacement of history is unthinkable. Yet it is an almost common occurrence in this and other societies. His-

torical forgetting occurs through the simple failure to document events which societies do not care to remember, such as the Salem witch trials. It also occurs in the actual destruction of monuments related to tragic events, as seen by the removal of nearly all of the buildings in Berlin which had been closely associated with Nazi power (pp. 385-387). Foote writes, "effacement is one common response to particularly shameful acts of violence, although a sense of stigma may still remain attached to the site itself" (p. 390). A more current example of this type of "forgetting" can be found in a quote from the recent purchaser of the townhouse which was the murder site of Nicole Brown Simpson. The buyer said that he planned to make it "difficult to recognize."

Of course, Foote (1990) is not proposing that archives also begin destroying records of tragic events. He is merely pointing out that "archives have never come to terms with the concept of the cultural effacement of memory" (p. 392). Yet if they are to function successfully as organizations which help to preserve a society's collective memory of its past, this is exactly the kind of dilemma they need to strive to understand. Foote writes that,

the possibility that a positive purpose might be served by conspiring to efface the collective memory of a particular event is alien to prevailing archival values, at least in contemporary western civilization. The point here is not to realign those values, but to help understand the conflicts inherent in any society's attempts to remember and deal with its past. (p. 392)

This type of understanding, of how the archives works as a function of a society, is necessary to the role suggested by Schaeffer, that of the archivist as social servant.

So is this archival theory? Do the articles from Schaeffer and Foote answer Burke's cry for introspection? They do. Both authors delve into aspects of the archives that go beyond the specific functions of the work. They look toward the greater social function of the archivist and the archives and do so in a way that remains open to further thought and study.

The difficulty in accepting archival theory can be traced to its lack of immediate relevance. Unlike the physical sciences where the importance and use of hypothesis and experimentation is immediately clear, the practical benefits of theorizing in the archival world is much less so. The articles by Schaeffer and Foote are indeed interesting, but they do nothing to ease the backlog of unsorted materials that fill archives all over the country. There may not be any other field where the

division between the academic and the practitioner is so clear, but they are not unrelated. The academic is necessary to keep the field moving forward, to open up the possibility for change. Societies change, institutions change, people change—so must the archives. The development of a coherent theoretical structure will help to pave the way. The archives are an important—perhaps even an essential—element of our society. As such they should remain present in a continuing intellectual dialogue which will serve to promote and ultimately to preserve the integrity and the importance of our collective record.

### NOTES

- 1 Perhaps the best response to Roberts comes from Ole Kolsrud (1992): “How seriously is Roberts to be taken? He is not the first barbarian I have come across among archivists, but at least he is an entertaining one” (p. 36).

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