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## Confusing the Bun for the Burger

### *Rehabilitating the Role of Content in the Archival Context*

Frank Boles<sup>1</sup> and Mark Greene<sup>2</sup>

#### **Zusammenfassung**

*Zwei unterschiedliche Traditionen kennzeichnen die amerikanische Bewertung und Überlieferungsbildung: die Tradition der öffentlichen Archive und die Manuskripttradition, die sich auf das Wirken der privaten historischen Gesellschaften im 18. Jahrhundert zurückführen lässt. Beide vertreten unterschiedliche Einschätzungen der gesellschaftlichen Rolle von Archiven und – damit verknüpft – je eigene Kriterien für die Überlieferungsbildung: Bewertung nach Evidenz- bzw. Informationswert der Unterlagen. Diskussion und Praxis verliefen in jüngerer Zeit auch auf internationaler Ebene eindeutig zugunsten der Bewertung nach Evidenz. Dies zielt jedoch an den Interessen der Archivbenutzer und -benutzerinnen vorbei, die primär an Information interessiert sind. Mit Blick auf das (friedliche) Nebeneinander der beiden Ansätze in der amerikanischen Archivtradition und unter Berufung auf die Grundsätze der Postmoderne sollen die Kriterien der Evidenz bzw. Information nicht mehr gegeneinander ausgespielt, sondern ausgerichtet auf den Auftrag des Archivs und die Interessen des Publikums für die Bewertung und Überlieferungsbildung nutzbar gemacht werden.*

#### **Résumé**

*L'évaluation et la formation des fonds aux Etats-Unis connaît deux traditions différentes: celle des archives publiques et celle de la tradition du ma-*

1 Since 1991 Frank Boles has served as director of the Clarke Historical Library at Central Michigan University. From 1982 to 1991 he held a variety of positions at the University of Michigan including assistant archivist for university records, associate archivist for electronic records, and instructor for archives in the University's School of Information.

2 Mark Greene is Head of Research Center Programs at Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village. He administers reference, access, and outreach programs for the collections division of one of the largest museums and historical sites in the United States. From 1989 to 2000 he was Curator of Manuscripts Acquisition at the Minnesota Historical Society.

*nuscrit dont on trouve l'origine dans l'activité des sociétés historiques privées du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Ces deux traditions apprécient de façon différente le rôle social des archives, et partant ont développé leurs propres critères de constitution des fonds: évaluation des documents selon leur valeur d'évidence, respectivement leur valeur d'information. Les discussions et la pratique prennent clairement de l'importance, également au plan international, en faveur de l'évaluation selon la valeur d'évidence. Cela ne rejoint pas les intérêts des utilisateurs des archives, qui sont intéressés en premier lieu au contenu informatif. En vue de la coexistence pacifique des deux approches de la tradition archivistique américaine et des principes post-modernes, les critères d'évidence et d'information ne doivent pas être mis en conflit, mais au contraire ces critères doivent être orientés vers le mandat des archives et les intérêts du public.*

Richard Berner, writing almost twenty years ago in *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States*, identified two diverse, co-equal, essential, but often contradictory, traditions in American archival thought. He labeled these approaches as the historic manuscripts tradition and the public archives tradition. Berner's thesis was expanded and greatly amplified a decade later by Luke Gilliland-Swetland<sup>3</sup>. These two traditions, which have sometimes been compared to the European distinction between documentalists<sup>4</sup> and archivists (respectively), have become intertwined in the United States under the general term of "archives". What this has meant for appraisal is that American archivists and manuscripts curators, or in American usage and hereafter in this article, simply "archivists", have blended selection criteria from the two traditions.

Over the past several years, archivists struggling to define and manage electronic records have argued for a clear separation of the appraisal of archives and of manuscripts, insisting that the former use narrowly evidential and transactional criteria for selection, while leaving the latter to consider informational and cultural criteria. To accept this division would be a tragic error in judgement. In the United States, there has

3 Richard Berner: *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States: A Historical Analysis* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983): 1–84. Luke J. Gilliland-Swetland: "The Provenance of a Profession: The Permanence of the Public Archives and Historical Manuscripts Tradition in American Archival History", *American Archivist* 54 (1991): 160–175.

4 The term "documentalist", however, also seems to be used in Europe and elsewhere outside North America to refer specifically to library catalogers rather than more broadly to professionals engaged in appraising, describing, and providing access to a wide variety of published and unpublished textual, visual, and even three-dimensional material. It is this latter connotation that most closely accords with the US term "manuscripts curator".

never been a national objective regarding archival appraisal nor a universal, systematic set of selection criteria. Rather, pluralistic missions and widely varying criteria for selection have been hallmarks of the American adaptation of archival practice. This practice, although neither neat nor tidy, has proved of extraordinary durability and service and continues to be a viable and important approach to selection specifically and to questions regarding archival documentation in general.

### **A Brief History of Appraisal Traditions in the US**

The American public archives tradition, although not without domestic precedent, derived its principal intellectual and practical foundations from nineteenth century European thought in general and the Dutch manual of Fuller, Feith and Fruin in particular<sup>5</sup>. The Dutch trio gave structure and form to a powerful tool still used by archivists today. Their volume codified an alternative developed by European archivists to the item-level, subject processing used in the early part of the nineteenth century by French archivists. Rather than examine every piece of paper and then re-arrange it into an arbitrary classification scheme, late nineteenth century archivists developed a powerful alternative based on provenance and form and genre terms. These tools proved a very useful way to describe records too numerous to read and certainly too difficult and time-consuming to reclassify. The publication of Muller, Feith and Fruin's manual, along with the adoption of provenance as the fundamental tool of archival organization at the International Archival Congress held in Brussels in 191x, marked the ratification of these tools by the European archival community. Americans at the Brussels conference brought this tool to the United States<sup>6</sup>.

The power of provenance, as well as form and genre tools, remains irrefutable. If a record is likened to a box holding information, then knowing who packed the box, why they packed it, and the kind of wrapping paper they used tells archivists a great deal about what will be found inside the box. What is to be found inside correspondence from the United States Department of Defense's ongoing efforts to develop a workable missile defense program is not likely to be confused with the information found in the minutes of a Health and Human Services Department meeting discussing federal funding for stem cell research. Muller, Feith and Fruin's work created the practical tool that successfully addressed

5 Muller, Feith, and Fruin: *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, Arthur H. Leavitt, (trans.) (New York, 1940).

6 Luke Gilliland-Swetland, 161.



various problems created for archivists if they attempted to use a subject-oriented descriptive paradigm inherited from librarianship<sup>7</sup>.

The identification of authentic, evidential records of public transactions, located and understood through contextual information, was the fundamental concern of the public archives tradition's selection criteria. The public archives tradition represented, not surprisingly, the concept of archives primarily in service of the State. That other social benefits might accrue from gathering these records of the State was readily acknowledged, but such benefits were incidental and not the principal concern of the appraising archivist<sup>8</sup>. Public archivists such as Margaret Cross Norton of Illinois became strong and effective advocates for a fairly pure strain of this public archives approach to selection<sup>9</sup>.

American record-keepers, however, were never fully comfortable with provenance-based strategies. Moreover, the public archives tradition itself was far less pure in the US than in Europe, having been influenced here by considerable attention and promotion by professional historians. For example, the leading archival repository at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Library of Congress, stubbornly clung to non-provenance-based tools to describe records. Similarly, when the United States government eventually founded a National Archives in 1934, that agency's staff included a large number of historians who adopted descriptive and selective practices that drew heavily from the United States' well-established historical manuscripts tradition.

The American historic manuscripts tradition was a more homespun affair, growing out of private historical societies that dotted eighteenth century America and which served to preserve cultural documentation about the American Republic. What was selected for preservation included much of what would have been preserved under the public archives tradition. However, the historic manuscripts tradition expanded the public archives tradition in several important ways. The requirements regarding record authenticity and evidence were weakened in pursuit of records containing desired information. The documentary

7 The idea that records are akin to a box holding information has seen considerable service in the last few years. For example, Sue Myburgh: "The Convergence of Information Technology & Information Management", *Information Management Journal* 34 (2000): 4-16 has described documents and records as "containers of information". Carolyn Heald: "Are We Collecting the Right Stuff?" *Archivaria* 40 (1995): 182-188, writes, "I fundamentally disagree with the notion that archives store information; we store artifacts in which information inheres."

8 Berner: *Archival Theory*, 11-17, outlines the development of the public archives tradition from 1800 to 1955.

9 Thornton W. Mitchell, ed.: *Norton on Archives; The Writings of Margaret Cross Norton on Archival & Records Management* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1975): 3-38. For a brief summary, see Luke Gilliland-Swetland, 165.

scope of the archives in the historic manuscripts tradition incorporated a much broader, cultural mandate into the archival mission. American archives of the historic manuscripts tradition were largely devoted to documenting the history and “progress” of the “American people”, perhaps a reaction to the sometimes explicit need to “prove” that the United States was as good as, if not better than, European nations. Regardless of the motive, as a result of these changes the historic manuscripts tradition has emphasized content in the selection of records for archival care with relatively less concern about contextual data<sup>10</sup>.

Despite the obvious and continuing tensions between these two traditions, for most of the twentieth century American archivists have moved freely between them when selecting archival material, Theodore Schellenberg’s work represents the culmination of this effort to insert historic manuscript thinking into the practices of a governmental repository<sup>11</sup>. This practical marriage of competing theories was first described in the writings of Schellenberg and has been continued by an American school of authors who have elaborated on this practical, if sometimes uncomfortable, union. Indeed, the heart of American archival theory and practice is found in the tension created by the American archivists’ literacy in and use of these contrasting approaches<sup>12</sup>.

Beginning in the late 1980s, several authors have called into question the traditional balance in American selection practice between the public archives and historic manuscripts tradition. Through a variety of arguments these authors have suggested, when in a generous spirit, that the historic manuscripts tradition is obsolescent, if not obsolete, or,

10 Berner, 11–17.

11 Berner: *Archival Theory*, 47–72; Luke Gilliland-Swetland, 162–163. Berner’s analysis, as amplified by Gilliland-Swetland, remains current today. See, for example, Richard Cox: “The Traditional Archival and Historical Records Program in the Digital Age: A Cautionary Tale”, *Records & Information Management Report* 17 (May 2001): 2–4, for a very similar view of the development of American archival institutions, which, if anything, stresses the historic manuscripts tradition’s influence over that of the public archives tradition. However, Cox’s conclusions regarding the continued viability of this tradition are very different than those found in this paper.

12 Ibid., 47–72. Berner discusses favorably the role of Schellenberg in reconciling the two traditions. Lester Cappon “Historical Manuscripts as Archives: Some Definitions and Their Applications”, *American Archivist* (1965): 101–110 may well be the classic statement of how archivists in the United States have blended the historic manuscript and public archives tradition. Terry Cook: “What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas since 1898 and the Future Paradigm Shift”, *Archivaria* 43 (1997): 27–29, also notes, although ultimately only to condemn it, the role of Schellenberg in including manuscript-related values into selection. Until the late 1980s, Schellenberg’s approach toward selection was the mainstream of archival thought in the United States. For example, the two appraisal manuals published by the Society of American Archivists – Maynard J. Brichford: *Archives and Manuscripts: Appraisal and Accessioning* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1977) and F. Gerald Ham: *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1993) – reflected Schellenberg’s sensibilities on this issue.

more harshly, was never a legitimate part of archival theory but rather a peculiar American error which improved study and scholarship within North America would eventually eliminate<sup>13</sup>. Although Schellenberg's work remained fundamental to American archival thinking about selection, over time, evolution in archival thinking about the concept of provenance raised serious challenges to Schellenberg's use of information as a selection tool.

Archivists argued, for example, that one could not appreciate the meaning of content without context. As time progressed, some archivists seemingly came to the opinion that context was more important than content. This argument emerged with particular vehemence in the selection literature. Archivists who continued to look at content as part of the selection process were characterized as being creatures of an inadequate and failing, if not already failed, paradigm. David Bearman's many offerings of the late 1980s and 1990s spearheaded this claim of obsolescent if not obsolete thinking among the "Schellenberg school" of archivists who selected material, in part at least, for the material's content<sup>14</sup>.

Bearman's critique of the Schellenberg school was given added persuasiveness by a trend among archivists that began in the 1960s and led to an expanded archival horizon. For the first half of the twentieth century, archivists on both sides of the Atlantic tended to cast their selection net narrowly. European archivists tended to focus on governmental records. North American archivists were less rigid in theory about the type of documentation admissible into the archives but in practice focused on documents that supported historical research on four basic topics: politics, war, foreign policy, and biography of great men. In the 1960s this narrow casting of archives was challenged. On the European side, Hans Booms' articles regarding the documentation of society expressed an expansion of the archival mission to preserve not just the records of the government but of the people themselves. In North America, a group of archivists led by Gerry Ham called for expanding the archivist's docu-

13 Terry Cook: "Mind over Matter: Toward a New Theory of Archival Appraisal" in Barbara L. Craig: *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor* (Ottawa: Association of Canadian Archivists, 1992): 43, allows that "That approach [selection as conceived by Schellenberg] was perhaps suitable for older documents, especially mediaeval ones. There, the surviving information universe is very limited and the functional context is often unknown. The archivist thus has no choice but to extrapolate that context from the surviving artifact." For a discussion and refutation of this view as offered by Luciana Duranti in defense of Hilary Jenkinson, see Frank Boles and Mark A. Greene: "'Et Tu Schellenberg?' Thoughts on the Dagger of American Appraisal Theory", *American Archivist* 59 (1996): 298-311.

14 Terry Cook, for example, has written that "Good archivists have always considered context more important than content ..." in "Mind over Matter", 38. David Bearman's critique of archival selection have appeared in many places; one of his most recent articles was "Archival Strategies", *American Archivist* 58 (1995): 380-413.

mentary horizons to include those people and groups who lacked visibility in the older historical paradigm. Canadians, in turn, revisited with new vigor the concept of total archives<sup>15</sup>.

An unintended consequence of this well-meant effort to democratize archival holdings was to legitimize David Bearman's critique of archival selection in which he looked at the total record output of society and, very rightly, pointed out that archival resources were completely inadequate to take on the broader mission pointed to by Booms and Ham. Had archivists not expanded their horizons, the simple answer to Bearman might well have been that archivists never intended to appraise all those records in the first place. But Bearman, in essence, called Booms' and Ham's bluff and asked how archivists would do the things they had claimed responsibility to do<sup>16</sup>.

Bearman's critique caused archivists to scramble for new answers, answers that seemed to be forthcoming largely from Canada and Australia. These new answers fell into two broad categories. Initially, archivists began to look for new paradigms for selection itself. More quietly, archivists, particularly those who dealt with electronic records, began to narrow the definition of what might be called "archival" in order, perhaps subconsciously, to solve the problem of magnitude identified by Bearman.

The archival concern with a "glut" of records has led to an effort to narrow the definition of an archival record to conveniently exclude large bodies of "cultural" information. Contemporary archivists have developed a baneful litany about the "glut". The service begins with recitation of estimates regarding the horrific number of records being created. It reaches its midpoint with dutiful breast-beating regarding the specter of even vaster arrays of data twitching unstably in huge, computerized databanks. The liturgy concludes with an archival absolution that there are more archival records than archivists can possibly save, thus forgiving archivists from the need to worry about over-abundant infor-

15 Most influential of Booms' writings among American archivists, primarily because it was translated into English, was "Society and the Formation of a Documentary Heritage: Issues in the Appraisal of Documentary Sources", *Archivaria* 24 (1987): 69–107. Activism among American archivists coalesced around an incendiary paper presented by historian Howard Zinn at the 1970 Society of American Archivist meeting and subsequently published in revised form as Howard Zinn: "Secrecy, Archives and the Public Interest", *Midwestern Archivist* 2 (1977): 14–26. For a consideration of how Zinn's paper galvanized a discontent already existing among archivists regarding the nation's documentary heritage, and those who had previously maintained that heritage, see Patrick Quinn: "Archives and Historians: 'The Times They are A-Changin'", *Midwestern Archivist* 2 (1977): 5–13. For a review of the concept of total archives, see Laura Millar: "The Spirit of Total Archives: Seeking a Sustainable Archival System", *Archivaria* 47 (1999): 46–65.

16 Bearman: "Archival Strategies", 381.



mation sources and allowing them to focus instead on particular containers of information called records.

The search for a new paradigm through which to select records for archival preservation led to a wide range of theoretical models in the 1980s and 1990s in North America. While most of that writing sought to raise archivists' sights from appraising records to appraising larger (and fewer) constructs, such as institutional functions or the importance of records creators, one set of authors was seeking to narrow the archival domain by restricting what "stuff" should be considered archival. These writers argued that the best way to choke back the mass of records placed before the archivist was to stress as critical the authentic and evidential characteristics of archival records.

This is a view expressed most recognizably by Hilary Jenkinson in the 1920s, in which the terms "archives" and "archivist" have a very narrow meaning. Archives, for Jenkinson, consist solely of material generated and/or accumulated by organizations in the course of business, and retained by that organization for the purposes of evidence and accountability. More recently, the "records as evidence" school of thought has been most apparent in the writings of Luciana Duranti and Richard Cox. Projects at the University of British Columbia and the University of Pittsburgh essentially presented better means to think about evidence in more comprehensive and thoughtful ways. Duranti insists that the mission of archives is to protect "reliable evidence of action and decision" through the preservation of "authentic documents embodying complete transactions". For Cox, this is "the re-discovery of the fundamental mission of the archival profession to maintain evidence"<sup>17</sup>.

"Real" archives in this view are completely separate from curatorial or historical concerns. As another archivist put it quite bluntly,

I do not accept the view that it is the role of an archivist "to preserve history", as Rob Spindler puts it. This may be the mission of manuscript libraries, but then I don't think they are archives in the true sense anyway. They may use archival techniques, but that does not make an archive ... The role of archives is ensuring the creation and continuing preservation of evidence for the purpose of accountability.<sup>18</sup>

17 Duranti: "The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory", *American Archivist* 57:2 (Spring 1994), 333, 336. Cox: "Re-Discovering the Archival Mission: The Recordkeeping Functional Requirements Project at the University of Pittsburgh; A Progress Report", September 1994, at the Functional Requirements website, <http://www.lis.pitt.edu/~nhprc/Pub1.html>. To be sure, the argument that archives have a purely evidential mission had a strong progenitor in the US in Margaret Holmes Norton, who (like Duranti) drew heavily on the work of Hilary Jenkinson in England.

18 Tim Robinson (University of Sydney) posting to the Archives and Archivists Listserv, 21 July 1995 (archive of list postings available at <http://listserv.muohio.edu/archives/archives.html>).

Because records are created and managed to serve operational needs, and because these records constitute archives, both Duranti and Cox argue that the cultural utility of archives is completely incidental to the true mission of archives. Cox credits the Pittsburgh Functional Requirements for Evidence in Record-keeping project with “the re-discovery of the fundamental mission of the archival profession to maintain evidence. American archivists have operated, far too long, as if their mission was only a cultural mission, when in fact the real mission should be to ensure that the essential evidence of organizations will be maintained, in whatever form is necessary – including electronic.”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Duranti writes that “archival material is impartial evidence of actions and transactions”, not information, and its relevant users are “records creators, ... related to administration and accountability”<sup>20</sup>.

This world view of the information universe rests uncomfortably on an untested and demonstrably untrue assumption. The assumption is that there is so much information that there is more than adequate documentation in the proper containers. “*The preservation of the evidence will provide more than is necessary for historians and others to conduct their research*, and this focus on evidence ... is much more manageable and crucial to the archival mission”, writes Cox<sup>21</sup>. Myopic consideration of only record context and raw numbers of records has blinded archivists to a fundamental truth: The knowledge that there are far too many containers does not prove that a particular set of containers happen to hold the right information. One of the most basic statistical tools is the normal distribution curve. Regardless of the size of any mass of anything, the normal curve suggests that there will be two “tails”; in this example one set of concerns that are over-documented and another set of concerns that are under-documented. By ignoring the informational concerns of the historic manuscripts tradition, archivists tragically fail to realize that content is not equally distributed among those all too numerous record containers.

It is even logically possible to predict what is likely to be over- and what under-documented. Elites, who control the means of producing

19 Cox: “Re-Discovering the Archival Mission”.

20 Luciana Duranti: “Commentary”, *American Archivist* 57:1 (Winter 1994), 36–37. Duranti is here rebutting NeXT Computer executive Ronald Weissman’s assertion that “archival institutions are ‘information repositories’” whose most important users are outside researchers building knowledge.

21 Richard Cox: “Putting the Puzzle Together: The Recordkeeping Functional Requirements Project at the University of Pittsburgh; A Second Progress Report”, March 1995, at the Functional Requirements website, <http://www.lis.pitt.edu/~nhprc/tab.html>. Emphasis added. For further critique of the Pittsburgh conception of record, see Linda Henry: “Schellenberg in Cyberspace”, *American Archivist* 16:2 (Fall 1998), 314–316.



records of transactions, will both create more records and produce records with better wrappers; that is, records more likely to meet the criteria imposed by the archival search to identify authentic evidence. Terry Cook, whose career has been spent working to improve the selection and retention of government records in Canada, has nonetheless noted that a transactional records-only approach

privileges the powerful in society, those who can own (or can afford to implement) recordkeeping systems. If everything but a transactional “record” is outside the purview of archives, then archival holdings will by definition only be drawn from that formal recordkeeping universe. Such holdings will therefore exclude more than they already do – the marginalized and weaker members of society ...<sup>22</sup>

Thus, the Prime Minister’s office will be well-documented, in contrast to that of a small community struggling to be recognized. Under-represented minorities will often “fall off the edge” of the official record. In the United States, for example, the concerns and lives of recently arrived immigrants will often be under-documented or, if documented, prejudiced through a strong elite bias. As Cook has noted, the simple fact that there are too many records does not mean that there are enough records of the right kind<sup>23</sup>.

To be sure, the concerns of Cox and Duranti have elements of considerable validity. Their concepts are tools that have their place in the early twenty-first century’s archivists kits, just as the tools of Muller, Feith and Fruin had a place in the kits of archivists from the early twentieth century. The danger in these tools occurs not in their use but when archivists choose to invest them with a character of exclusivity that denies the usefulness of other tools and to a similarly narrow focus and exclusive definition of an archival record. Archivists who do this have confused archival tools and arcane academic debates over the definition of records with the true purpose of the archival endeavor.

The belief that the American practice is outdated or that an “American error” should be eradicated from the archival discourse on selection is fundamentally wrong. This is not to say that the converse is true, that the US tradition of accepting both archives and manuscript approaches to appraisal is universally valid and effective. In some environments, it might well be a sensible approach. In others, it might be inappropriate. What seems clearly true, however, is that the “American error” con-

22 Terry Cook: “Who Will Do It if We Don’t?: The Cultural Mission of Archives vis-a-vis Electronic Records”, paper presented at the 1997 Society of American Archivists Conference.

23 Cook: “Mind over Matter”, 49–50.

tinues to serve the work well in the United States now and into the foreseeable future<sup>24</sup>.

### **“Where’s the Beef?” Content as the Meat of Archival Purpose**

A most appropriate metaphor for the American tradition of appraisal is found in an icon of US television advertising for the quintessential American meal, the fast-food hamburger. In a commercial that became so famous that it served as the tag-line for a US presidential candidate, a crotchety old lady visits a major American hamburger chain restaurant, and stares long and hard at what she is served: a very tiny burger almost invisible against the oversized bun on which it sits. Outraged, she demands of the restaurant’s staff, “Where’s the beef?!”<sup>25</sup> Those US archivists who follow the Schellenbergian tradition believe that users of archives, like the old lady in the hamburger restaurant, are interested in finding the beef, that is, the information and view the bun, or the record, as little more than a necessary container<sup>26</sup>.

24 Terry Eastwood: “Towards a Social Theory of Appraisal”, in Barbara L. Craig: *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor* (Ottawa: Association of Canadian Archivists, 1992): 71–72, puts forward the pragmatic and very valuable argument that the only way to measure a theory’s usefulness is how to assess well it serves the work of archivists.

25 The original ad, by Wendy’s hamburger chain, has been ranked the best US ad since 1960 by *USA Today* (<http://www.usatoday.com/money/index/ad249.htm>). Walter Mondale used the phrase in his primary debates with his main challenger, Gary Hart, to devastating effect. The phrase has become so resonant in US language that a recent “Yahoo!” search on “Where’s the beef” turned up over 9,000 hits, the vast majority having nothing to do with hamburgers.

26 This same hamburger metaphor may be used against us by our critics, who will point out that American “fast-food” restaurants are notorious for their poor nutritional value and simplistic menu and will draw similar conclusions about the arguments we present here. At the risk of extending the metaphor too far, we would note that some archivists have long expressed disdain at the growing number of patrons who expect fast intellectual sustenance at an archive – and for those archivists who are willing to try to meet these patrons at least half way:

I don’t want customers in my museum. My dictionary says that customers are people who shop, and I don’t want shoppers in my museum. I don’t want patrons either; my dictionary says a patron is a regular customer. I want RESEARCHERS who come to carry out serious systematic study or investigation in a particular field. That’s what I want ... Patrons may use libraries, but they don’t use archival material. [George Bauer, 12 August 1997 posting to Archives and Archivists Listserv.]

We suspect that almost identical comments were made by owners of “serious” restaurants as first drive-ins and then true fast-food establishments invaded the US (and later Europe and the rest of the world) in the 1950s. On the other hand, there are many archivists who find legitimacy in responding to clear social demands for a different kind of archival experience: “Who am I to say that a person who comes into the archives for a short time and engages in seemingly casual browsing doesn’t derive as much benefit as a ‘serious’ researcher who stays for a week? To do so is to exhibit an elitism that our profession can ill afford” (Kevin Enns-Rempel, 13 August 1997, posting to Archives and Archivist Listserv).

The difference between “high-quality, high-cost, few-customers (Nordstrom) or good-but-limited service, low cost, many served (McDonald’s)” (comments from National Archives archivist, excerpted in message from Jim Whittington, 25 April 1994, to Archives and Archivist Listserv) is not one of good versus bad but of different goods.

The broader objective of archives, as the mainstream of US archivists sees it, is, put very bluntly, to preserve and make available information. Admittedly that information is embedded in a record that has certain, independent uses that are of value, but it is the information in the record, not the record's original function, nor its warrant, nor even its provenance that truly matters to the users whom the archival community serves. Archivists can use the record container that surrounds the information to supplement and, in many cases, legitimize that information. This supplementary information and possible legitimization is important. It is, however, a means, not an end. The value of selection criteria derived from the American historic manuscripts tradition, with its emphasis on content, is that it directly focuses archival attention on what is the real end of the archival endeavor; the identification and preservation of information which is of use to those who seek it in the archives<sup>27</sup>.

Put another way, the archivist's obsessions involving authenticity, evidence, or even provenance are not those of the users. Words like authenticity, evidence, and provenance, so important to the archival discourse, are merely adjectives to those who make use of archives. It is difficult to conceive of a user who asks simply for authentic evidence about the Department of Defense. Authentic evidence from the Department of the Army about the invasion of Europe on D-Day, or for that matter unidentified flying objects, may be requested. But ultimately archival users want information, not record containers. If the information can be certified as authentic and evidential, so much the better, but the user's goal is the information itself even if the source, in the archivist's mind, is a tainted one<sup>28</sup>.

Despite Duranti's assertion that "When a researcher goes to an archives, she/he expects to find material inherently reliable because of its circumstances of creation"<sup>29</sup>, most researchers (and, not insignificantly,

27 The difficulties caused by archival obsessions over the precise definition of the term "record" is seen, for example, in Kalpana Shankar: "Towards a Framework for Managing Electronic Records in Scientific Research", *Archival Issues* 24 (1999): 21–35, where the author demonstrates how the carefully constructed Pittsburgh and University of British Columbia definitions of record either simply do not work in the scientific arena or have to be twisted and tortured to fit records of core importance in documenting science. Americans are not alone in their appreciation of the importance of information when considering archival records. See, for example, Michael Cook: *The Management of Information from Archives, Second Edition* (Aldershot: Hampshire, England, 1999): 89, for a discussion which is, in many ways, very similar to, although more temperate than, the one presented in this article.

28 Sue Myburgh: "The Convergence of Information Technology & Information Management", makes a very similar point regarding the use of documents and records, terms which she distinguishes by saying that records are a subset of documents which happen to have particular legal standing in the agency of origin.

29 Duranti, 24 May 1993, posting to Archives and Archivists Listserv. An extended version of the argument here and to the end of this section may be found in Mark A. Greene, Frank

most US courts<sup>30</sup>) generally expect to find material inherently reliable because there is no reason *not* to consider it reliable – regardless of whether it is found in an “archive”, in a manuscript repository, in a private collection, or in a landfill. If in doubt, ask any genealogist pouring over alienated courthouse records in a university special collection, or any scholar searching for every last Lincoln or Hemingway letter in scattered collections across the globe.

To reinforce this latter point, take, for example, the use of records by genealogists, one of the most common groups of users in archives throughout the world. Ideally, genealogists would like to find an authentic birth certificate, marriage license, or death certificate at the appropriate governmental agency or public archives. Finding instead, perhaps, a county marriage register with a tainted chain of custody (for example, and this is not at all uncommon, having been donated to a private local historical society by the new owners of a house in which the register was discovered in the attic), most genealogists will be content – possibly even ecstatic – depending on how difficult their search has been so far. Failing even to find a questionable official record, however, a genealogist will quite happily settle for a newspaper clipping. In some circumstances, the genealogist may actually prefer the newspaper if it goes on to describe the bride’s wedding dress in considerable detail or give a

Boles, Richard L. Pifer, Bruce Bruemmer, Todd J. Daniels-Howell: “The Archivist’s New Clothes; or, the Naked Truth about Evidence, Transactions, and Recordness”, presented at the 2000/01 Sawyer Seminar, University of Michigan (<http://www.umich.edu/%7Eiinet/asc/Winter2001/Papers/Greene.pdf>).

- 30 As for the notion that the burden of proof for the authenticity of a record (or other document) depends on strict definitions of records or on proving record-keeping bonds or on implementing functional requirements or on comprehensive audit trails demonstrating “continuity of management” (David Bearman: “Archival Data Management to Achieve Organizational Accountability for Electronic Records”, *Archives and Manuscripts* Vol. 21 No. 1 [May 1993], 20), The National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws aver that the only thing necessary is that records and documents be created in the “regular practice” of business and that there be *no overt reason to suspect the trustworthiness of the record*:

Record of regularly conducted business activity. “Business”, as used in this paragraph, includes business, institution, association, profession, occupation, and calling of every kind, whether or not conducted for profit. A record, of acts, events, conditions, opinions, or diagnoses, made at or near the time by, or from information transmitted by, a person with knowledge, *if kept in the course of a regularly conducted business activity, and if it was the regular practice of that business activity to make the record*, all as shown by the testimony of the custodian or other qualified witness, or by certification that complies with Rule 902 (11) or (12), or with a statute providing for certification, *unless the sources of information or the method or circumstances of preparation indicate lack of trustworthiness*. A public record inadmissible under paragraph (8) is inadmissible under this exception. [Uniform Rules of Evidence, as approved, July 1999, (emphasis added).]

Most state laws already conform to these same rules of evidence. So, apparently, does British law. See Ian Walden: “Electronic Documentation and the Law”, Seamus Ross and Edward Higgs, ed.: *Electronic Information Resources and Historians: European Perspectives* (St. Katharinen, 1993), 121–125.



lengthy list of the new baby's siblings, aunts and uncles, and grandparents. Similarly, a substantive individual letter from Thomas Jefferson preserved in the Minnesota Historical Society remains a useful source about Jefferson, despite being alienated from all context. A good scholar would place it in the context of other Jefferson material at other institutions, and this would enhance, but not create, its informational value<sup>31</sup>.

Within the electronic records universe, in particular, Cox has gone so far as to write that "Electronic record-keeping systems will make it difficult to acquire electronic records unless we have substantial support from the records creators or unless we want to become the equivalent of pothunters spoiling archaeological sites by taking bits and pieces of the record-keeping systems through paper printouts and other snapshots. Who wants this stuff?" But archivists have always taken "bits and pieces of the record-keeping system" whenever they have done any appraisal at all – appraisal by definition is selection from the whole (or such of the whole as remains to be selected from). Archivists seek to understand record-keeping systems expressly so as to identify those portions that most effectively document an organization, business, or event. Not only do researchers value record-keeping systems when appropriate to their work, but people also want "bits and pieces" of record-keeping systems when those bits and pieces have information they want and can use<sup>32</sup>.

The pure and complete context that Cox, Duranti, and the neo-Jenkinsonians value so highly is, in fact, of *primary* value to almost nobody. In the final analysis, context is a means to an end, not the end in itself. The end is not context but rather useful, accessible, and reliable information. Some degree of context is necessary for achieving that end. But context is not so fragile and system-bound as Cox and Duranti

31 Conversely, any university archivist who tried to answer the development officer's query for "information on the origins of our program in China" would be quickly unemployed if she answered with "well, to really understand that you'll have to have the complete context, so you'll have to read three boxes of records from the President's Office, the Board of Trustees, and the Director of the China program".

32 Richard J. Cox: "Blown to Bits: Electronic Records, Archivy, and Corporation", *The Records of American Business*, ed. James. M. O'Toole (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1997), 243. It is not only US archivists who see the fundamental archival value of information-bits and pieces of disaggregated data – as having meaning, increasingly, in the modern world. French archival educator Bruno Delmas argues that the "new paradigm" for archives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to provide society with access to information rather than to preserve certain kinds of records. This is reality, he insists, and archivists had better get used to it. To quote, "there are no more categories of documents corresponding to identified uses, ... but a mass of information for unlimited and endless requests". Delmas: "Archival Science Facing the Information Society", *Archival Science* 1 (March 2001), 30 (also online at <http://www.wkap.nl/sample.pdf?322694>). Contrast this to Cox: *Closing an Era*, 135–149, which takes the Web as the focus of an "archives are records not information" argument.

(building on Jenkinson) perceive. The alienated marriage records *do have* context, even if their original fonds is 500 miles away. And a printed e-mail (with the proper embedded date and address fields) can be accurately interpreted, even if it is alienated from the e-mail system that generated or received it – there is no better (or more just) example than the printouts of individual e-mail messages submitted as evidence by both parties to *United States v. Microsoft*<sup>33</sup>.

In the end, society seeks and values above all else content, not context. So, however we go about doing it, archivists must deliver content to our users. Archivists forget this reality at their peril. Theodore Schellenberg's critical insight into selection was to get the relationship between content and context right through the concept of informational value. The archival mission, Schellenberg realized, was about selecting, describing, and preserving information needed for the long haul. His emphasis on information showed a clear understanding of what people sought when they came to the archives. Schellenberg was not unaware or unappreciative of the valuable tools supplied through the public archives tradition, but he placed them in the perspective of archival users rather than professional archivists. The record "container" is merely a convenient tool with which to sort through reams of information and find what is useful. The relationship posited by Schellenberg through the concept of informational value is clear. Society first needs information. If, and only if, information can be found, then archivists should look for the information with the best packaging, that is authenticity and evidence.

### **Some Thoughts About Archives and Democratic Accountability**

Some archivists have begun to argue a need to privilege evidential records over informational documents. They assert that the very foundation of a democratic government rests on authentic accountable records found within the archives. This theory is a backward-looking effort that

33 Trial testimony and evidence are reproduced at "Business Week Online/Court TV Online: Microsoft on Trial", <http://www.courttv.com/trials/microsoft/legaldocs/>. After looking at laws and legal books, Anne J. Gilliland Swetland: "Maintaining and Providing Access to Electronic Evidence: The US Experience", *The Irish Archivist* (forthcoming, Autumn 2000), concludes: "Ironically, however, while archivists have been striving, through research projects such as the Pittsburgh Project ... and the current InterPARES Project, to develop the specifications that would allow for electronic record-keeping systems to be designed and managed in the most effective ways to ... meet the Best Evidence requirements ..., US courts in many cases seem to have been much less stringent and systematic in deciding what electronic materials they are prepared to admit as evidence, admitting even snatches of recovered data supposedly deleted from organizational and personal hard drives and back-up tapes."



attempts to graft antique archival traditions rooted in the service of an undemocratic sovereign state onto democratic notions of government that place sovereignty firmly in the hands of the people. The simple truth is that, in a democracy, the people have little or no inherent need for this service.

That archives have among their records evidence relevant to government accountability is undoubtedly true. What is not necessarily true, however, is that this evidence is fundamental to accountability in a democratic state. It has often been noted that the United States was formed in 1789 but did not found a national archive until 1934. This presents an uncomfortable problem for archivists who hold that an archive is essential for public accountability. An archivist could assert that, for the first century and a half of the American Republic's existence, the lack of a national archive meant that there was no appropriate form of democratic accountability. However, it would take an archivist of considerable hubris to suggest that the founders of the American Republic, the men who invented western democracy, as it is today understood, somehow failed to comprehend how to hold the leaders of their invention accountable. In looking at the durability of the Republic they constructed, it would also require an archivist to assert an incredible run of dumb luck to explain how, lacking proper means of accountability, the leadership of the American Republic, by and large, was nevertheless restrained.

To resolve this historical unpleasantness, traditional historians of national archives within western democracies have ignored the American situation and asserted that the French Revolution was a critical turning-point in the assumption of public responsibilities by a national archive<sup>34</sup>. Since the French archives did assume such responsibilities and many state archivists found benefit in asserting the need for such responsibilities, this was a convenient, if essentially ahistorical, argument. In the 1940s some US archivists made apologies for why the United States had failed to "see the light" and establish, in a timely manner, a "good" national archive. They crafted exhortations to ensure that the then newly-established National Archives of the United States did not continue in this particular "American error" but instead would hew to the "correct" path, as defined by the French experience<sup>35</sup>.

34 See, for example, Ernst Posner: "Some Aspects of Archival Development Since the French Revolution", reprinted in Maygene F. Daniels and Timothy Walch: *A Modern Archives Reader: Basic Readings on Archival Theory and Practice* (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Service, 1984): 3–14.

35 For a recent iteration of this approach, see Luciana Duranti: "Meeting the Challenge of Contemporary Records: Does it Require a Role Change for the Archivist", *American Archivist*

Despite archival literature's insistence that archives play a fundamental role in governmental accountability, this has not been the experience within the American republic. The founding fathers of the United States did not put their trust into a national archive as an agent of public accountability. This system does not rely on evidence embedded in authentic records, though it occasionally benefits from such evidence. Indeed, nowhere in the US Constitution are archives or public records so much as mentioned. Rather, the framers of the Constitution created a republic that depended on

the information of intelligent men, in whom they [the electorate] confide; and how must these men obtain their information? Evidently from the complexion of public measures, from the public prints, from correspondences with their representatives, and with other persons who reside at the place of their deliberations<sup>36</sup>.

The founders relied on the requirement that the government publish certain information, an interested and factious electorate, frequent elections, and the additional bulwark of a free press to resolve issues of accountability.

The founders of the American republic knew all too well that neither the press nor the ballot box were perfect mechanisms. But, as pragmatists, they came to believe that a pluralistic and unfettered press could be relied on to report the various interpretations of the "news", even if particular papers did this badly and with blatant bias. When the citizenry came to exercise their franchise, the founders pragmatically believed that, most of the time, the majority of the people would sort out the babble of conflicting newspapers and exact such political accountability as they deemed necessary. This is neither a tidy nor logical system. It is merely, in comparison with the alternatives, an eminently workable and efficient one for dealing with the threat of tyrants, incompetents, or other undesirables in office.

Archives played no fundamental role in this democratic construct. Perhaps sensing this disconnect between public archives and accountability in a democratic State, some archivists have attempted to graft a "vital records" function onto public archives by claiming that records

63 (2000): 10. Although Duranti's comments show the continued vitality of this ahistorical argument, there is a long tradition in American archival literature pointing to the French Revolution as pivotal to archival responsibilities and ignoring the archival implications of our own revolution. See, for example, Ernst Posner: "Some Aspects of Archival Development Since the French Revolution", *American Archivist* 3 (1940): 159–172. The subsequent writings of Schellenberg proved Posner's fear of a "rogue" American national archive to be well-founded.

36 Federalist Papers, LXXXIV (Alexander Hamilton), from the web version at the University of Virginia, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/FEDERAL/>

necessary to the exercise of individual rights and privileges are found within the archives. Some have gone so far as to lament that archives have never become an independent branch of government, outside executive, legislative, or judicial control<sup>37</sup>. But, like the assertion that archival records are essential to democratic accountability, this assertion cannot stand against the test of American practice.

In the decentralized environment of American governance, some records vital to the rights of individual citizens may be found in archives. It is just as likely, however, that records vital to the citizenry will not be in archival homes. For example, in the State of Michigan, the official records regarding births and deaths are maintained, in perpetuity, by the Department of Health within their own offices, rather than in the State archives. Marriage records are maintained at an even more local governmental level: in the eighty-three independent county clerk's offices that dot Michigan. A few counties have established an archive but most have not. Similarly, in the American system of higher education, the official documentation regarding the conferring of degrees, the most basic function performed by a university and the most vital of records for the graduate, is rarely maintained in the archives. In these simple examples it is clear that in the United States archives may have records of importance to individual citizens, but it is not the archives exclusive responsibility or jurisdiction. If records vital to individual citizens are found in an American archive it is more likely the result of happenstance than planning.

As the American example makes clear, archives may play a role in maintaining public accountability or records of vital importance to the exercising of individual rights, but that role is not an essential nor exclusive one for American governmental archives. It is just as possible to bypass the archives and use other democratic tools or governmental agencies to achieve these goals. Archives are no more essential to democratic government than the glut of authentic, evidential documents guarantees that there will be sufficient documentation on a particular topic. When the day is done, the question becomes one of archival mission and the content of the archival record rather than the form that the record takes.

Similarly, in contrast to the narrow focusing of some archivists on transactional records supplying evidence for government accountability, American public archives have usually been imbued with a historical responsibility. Robert Warner, former archivist of the United States, has

37 David Bearman and Margaret Hedstrom: "Reinventing Archives for Electronic Records: Alternative Service Delivery Options", *Electronic Records Management Program Strategies*, Margaret Hedstrom, ed. (Archives and Museum Informatics, 1993), 84.

written that the long period between 1950 and 1984 when the United States National Archives was under the control of the General Services Administration (GSA), a governmental agency concerned with the government's housekeeping functions, was a terrible error.

Although the Archives did perform the government's records management functions which could be seen as 'housekeeping' through the eyes of the GSA, its cultural mission of preserving the memory and historical heritage of the American nations was far more important yet had little relevance to the new agency. The General Services Administration oversees the construction and maintenance of public buildings; it supervises motor pools; it manages communication systems and other housekeeping functions – all useful and necessary. But this work has nothing to do with the preservation of the greatest documents of American history, nor was GSA interested in or equipped to contribute to the cultural leadership of the nation. Thus this merger was not just another bureaucratic battle over turf; it was a major mistake in public policy.<sup>38</sup>

Note Warner's words well. Charging the National Archives of the United States to simply care well for the records of the government itself without regard to a broader cultural mission was "a major mistake in public policy".

In the United States, the federal archives exist to promote a documentary heritage built around a cultural agenda, not merely to preserve a body of evidential records that ensure either governmental accountability or the rights of individuals. Robert Warner was not alone in understanding the cultural importance of a public archive. Ian Wilson, the current archivist of Canada, has also argued for the Canadian National Archives to play an important cultural role in that nation<sup>39</sup>. Clearly, at least in North America, there is a tradition that archives, including state archives, are part of a much broader and richer responsibility than would be allowed for by those who would narrow the definition of the term archives to cover only evidential documents of a transactional nature.

In summary, the attempt to separate accountability from culture may make for a more comprehensible and structured universe, but it violates the very foundation of the archival enterprise in the United States.

The electronic records management approach may provide a cleaner, and more administratively persuasive, framework within which the fuzzy universe of digital materials can be examined ... It is, at best, however, limiting from a true archival perspective, and at worst, actually precludes the identification, preservation, and use of those materials

38 Robert A. Warner: *Diary of a Dream: A History of the National Archives Independence Movement, 1980–1985* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1995): 4–5.

39 Ian Wilson: "Commentary: Reflection on Archival Strategies", *American Archivist* 58 (1995): 418–420.



that the archivist often finds to be the richest in historical terms, those that are integral to the process of *Überlieferung* or the handing down of culture to future generations<sup>40</sup>.

The American error to allow for, and indeed embrace, both content and context in selection pragmatically serves the work well in the United States. It allows for America's archives to serve narrowly defined governmental functions, when those responsibilities are given to the archives by the state. It also allows archives in the United State without reference to or simultaneous with a governmental responsibility to serve broader cultural objectives which, in the United States, is the more typical model. These other objectives, the responsibility to maintain a cultural heritage, are deeply rooted in the practice of archives within the United States. Any theoretical framework that seeks to explain archival practice in the United States that cannot encompass this broader framework is doomed to failure.

### **Post-modernism and US Archival Traditions**

Although American selection practices were born of the unexpected marriage of the historic manuscripts and public archives tradition over which Theodore Schellenberg presided, and continues to serve the pragmatic goals of many archivists in the United States, the child of this pragmatic union has found new theoretical underpinnings in post-modernist thinking. Post-modernism, it is fair to say, is not a philosophical concept congenial to many archivists. Post-modernism has been derided in American archival publications as "historical deafness" or "a random cannibalization of all the styles of the past"<sup>41</sup>. Although it is clearly possible to find the worst in post-modernist writing, more sympathetic views regarding the usefulness of the concept can also be found among archival writers. Preben Mortensen, in particular, has written with great sympathy regarding the power of the concept<sup>42</sup>.

Brien Brothman and Richard Brown, in a letter to the editor published in the *American Archivist*, directly define the utility of post-modernism in adjusting archival theory, including that involving selection, to a multi-cultural world. Instead of a single set of principles or methodo-

40 Anne Gilliland-Swetland: "Digital Communications: Documentary Opportunities Not to Be Missed", *Archival Issues* 20:1 (1995), 47.

41 Carolyn Heald: "Is there Room for Archives in the Postmodern World?", *American Archivist* 59 (1996): 898-890.

42 Preben Mortensen: "The Place of Theory in Archival Practice", *Archivaria* 47 (1999): 1-26. For a somewhat similar piece, but with considerably more attitude, see Lilly Koltun: "The Promise and Threat of Digital Options in an Archival Age", *Archivaria* 47 (1999): 114-135.

logical programs, “one sovereign paradigm”, as they label it, Brothman and Brown call for the “development of something like what philosopher of science Mary Hesse once called ‘local domain’ theories” among archivists. As archivists retrofit post-modernist thought to the archival task, it becomes obvious that this line of thought rests comfortably against the eclectic approach to archival selection pragmatically endorsed in Schellenberg’s marriage of the historical manuscript and public archives tradition and those who follow in Schellenberg’s information-oriented wake. More recently authors like Boles, Boles and Young, Boles and Greene, and Greene and Daniels-Howell have all taken an eclectic view toward selection based not on grand social purpose or overriding archival need but rather on institutional mission<sup>43</sup>. Post-modernist thinking creates the philosophical underpinning that Schellenberg, in his pragmatic way, never cared to develop<sup>44</sup>.

These neo-Schellenbergian pragmatists have, like other archivists, retrenched from the overly ambitious documentary objectives of Ham and Booms. At the same time, however, they depart from many of the positivist, universalist philosophies of their context-driven colleagues. In place of a universal archival theory and broad national documentary goals, they have suggested a plethora of mission-oriented archives, each working its own part of the documentary universe and each employing those tools appropriate to the mission undertaken and the universe being mined<sup>45</sup>.

Unlike their electronic counterparts, however, Boles, Greene, and Daniels-Howell do not limit the archival universe through a single-purpose and narrowly defined archival record, nor by looking at archival records exclusively through the tools of form, genre, and provenance. Rather, they conceive of a very broadly-based archival universe consistent with post-modernist thinking and populated with a pluralistic variety of selection tools and selecting missions. In this vision of archives, each archival institutional is free to adopt its own area of documentary concern and “view” of the world. The vision allows for the possibility of governmental archives focusing narrowly on authentic, evidential records working side by side with topically-oriented collec-

43 Boles and Greene: “Et tu, Schellenberg?”, Greene and Daniels-Howell: “Appraisal with an Attitude”, Frank Boles and Julia Marks Young: “Exploring the Black Box: The Appraisal of University Administrative Records”, *American Archivist* 48:2 (Spring 1985), 121–140, Frank Boles: “Mix Two Parts Interest to One Part Information and Appraise Until Done: Understanding Contemporary Record Selection Processes”, *American Archivist* 50:3 (Summer 1987), 356–368.

44 Boles and Greene: “Et Tu Schellenberg”, 307–309.

45 Frank Boles: “Mix Two Parts Interest to One Part Information and Appraise Until Done: Understanding Contemporary Record Selection”, *American Archivist* 50 (1987): 356–369.



tions gathering whatever information there is to find regarding small, hard-to-document communities. In this vision, these two missions are neither incompatible nor of greater or lesser importance. The missions are simply documentary tasks assigned to the archives by the agency from which the archives draws support. Similarly, in the tradition of Schellenberg and the "American error", this vision offers archivists a variety of selection tools that employ both contextual- and content-based criteria and asks the archivist to select those tools that work most effectively within the local domain defined by their institution's mission.

Critics of such an approach worry about archives descending into a post-modernist swamp of moral relativism, as well as the obvious problems regarding broad social overview that is inherent in an approach so fragmentary and decentralized. These are legitimate concerns. But, if post-modernism, taken to extremes, leads to a swamp of archival relativism, the positivistic, universalistic approach that dominates much of European archival theory, also taken to extremes, leads to the excesses of post World War II eastern European archives, where "scientific Marxism" and Communist Party ideology came to control archival selection. The entire American experience speaks strongly against adopting a single "correct" approach, whether the "correctness" is rooted in social beliefs or scientific assertions. The criticism of post-modernist thinking as a relativist swamp simply reminds many pragmatic American archivists that any theory, taken to extreme, is likely to be dangerous. It implicitly argues for the pragmatism long shown by archivists in the United States when faced with questions regarding selection<sup>46</sup>.

More legitimate concerns regarding fragmentation and missed documentary agendas created by a decentralized archival system are more difficult to address succinctly. It is certainly true that any archival selection system that lacks a planned national or even an international core suffers the risk of missing some element of society. That acknowledged, archivists who call for extensive documentation planning might well look long and hard at the twentieth century's experiments with nationally planned economies. At the beginning of the twentieth century, planned economies seemed a rational and logical way to democratize wealth among the citizenry. Huge political movements supported this concept. By the end of the twentieth century, however, planned econo-

46 Richard Cox: "The Archivist and Collecting: A Review Essay", *American Archivist* 59 (1996); 496-512, makes clear his disdain for this non-systematic approach to documentation, complaining that the marketplace approach to collecting inevitably results in archives either becoming repositories of interesting "stuff" without any real coherence or a "wonder cabinet" of curiosities. Those who support the marketplace idea believe archivists are made of sterner fiber than Cox supposes and will not fall into such obvious traps.

mies had collapsed across the globe. What emerged as ultimately successful were the disorderly, almost chaotic, mechanisms of the free market through which to distribute wealth.

Timothy Ericson, a well-known American archivist located in the Midwestern United States, once compared archival planning to a craze for round barns in the state of Wisconsin and elsewhere in the Midwest. Round barns, theoreticians of farm economics solemnly proposed, would be far more efficient in their operation. Cows could be more easily fed. Milking could be done from a more centralized location. The experts declared the round dairy barn was superior to the rectangular barn. All this made tremendous intellectual sense. Round barns made for elegant drawings and equally elegant presentations at academic gatherings. The only problem was the pragmatic farmers, who rarely had time to read more than the daily paper and likely never went to an academic conference, discovered that a round barn didn't work much better than a rectangular barn – but it did cost more to build<sup>47</sup>.

The moral of Ericson's home-spun example for archivists is clear. A national system of archival planning and selection may look elegant and appealing in theory or at professional presentations. But, despite the extra effort to build it, in implementation it may well prove no better than the old system. Indeed, if archival planning for a national documentation plan follows the twentieth century pattern that has befallen national economic planning, archivists might well be advised not to walk but rather run away from the concept. A free marketplace of archival institutions, each pursuing its own agenda, may be neither elegant nor organized in a way satisfactory to the tidy minds of archival academics. Indeed, it may not even work very well outside of the United States and the peculiar environment in which so much authority is transferred to local government and private organizations, at the expense of a national order<sup>48</sup>. However, like an unplanned economic market, a marketplace of archives may simply be the best mere humans can do. It is in this implicit and humbling recognition of archivists' and archival institutions' human frailty and in acknowledging the simple truth that meeting the informational needs of archive users is the ultimate goal of archivists that

47 Timothy L. Ericson: "'To Approximate June Pasture': The Documentation Strategy in the Real World", *Archival Issues* 22 (1997): 5–6. For anyone interested, there is a website devoted to round barns in the US, at <http://www.vreug.com/barns.html>

48 This decentralized character of US politics and society was most famously described and analyzed by Alexis de Toqueville in his *Democracy in America* (1831–1832), particularly Volume I, Chapter 5, and Volume II, Chapters 4 and 5. The full text of *Democracy in America*, in English translation, is available at the University of Virginia's website, at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/home.html>

American selection practices have made their greatest contribution. American selection theory has, for all its many faults, continued to remember that it is the beef our users seek rather than the bun.