Counterpoint

The Manx Peril: Archival Theory in Light of Recent American Historiography

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Archivists want a consensus across the research communities they seek to serve on what sort of records will be most useful, not merely now but in the future. Similarly, teachers want a coherent view of history to pass on to their students. These needs have sent scholars — whether teachers or archivists — in search of some threads of consensus or coherence in the histories that have been written by the generation of the 1960s and 1970s. In his 1981 call for a more consciously formulated archival theory, Frank Burke set out what he considered must be central questions for archivists:

> What is the nature of history, historical fact and historical thought? What are the facts, and how do they affect interpretation? . . . Should the archivist be concerned that what he is preserving is truth, or just evidence? . . . Do records establish facts? Or are records just interpretations of the facts by the records creators?[1]

The issues of the limits and character of human knowledge have touched almost all academic disciplines in almost all countries; and profoundly influenced some national scholarly communities. However, it is unusual to find broad debates upon such fundamental issues among English-speaking archivists or historians in any country. Therefore, the recent debates which have dominated American historical journals over the past three or four years are of special interest.

The writing of Canadian history has tended to follow fashions set elsewhere. Especially for English Canadians, American trends have had great impact. Perhaps there is not now the 'cultural time lag' that once existed between, say, the birth of Frederick Jackson Turner's "frontierism" in the 1890s and its belated arrival in Canada in the 1920s. But undoubtedly the sheer scale and proximity of the American history industry continues profoundly to influence how English Canadians write the history of Canada. If it is no longer true that 'to see the United States today is to see Canada tomorrow', we can at least see a much larger scholarly community discussing issues that are and will remain central to our own work.

Historiographical debates have been convulsed in the past decade by two overbearing problems. The first has been the fact that the "new" social history of the last generation has not only *not* produced a new consensus; it has appeared to some to deny even the

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possibility of a single vision. At first, this might seem to be more a problem for the teacher (who hopes to present a coherent view of the nation's past to the student) than the archivist. The latter could accept, at least as an abstract proposition, a multitude of research agendas, without feeling any need to reconcile them. However, archivists in real life are faced with limited resources, which cannot simultaneously serve the unlimited demands made by an unfocused "histoire totale." But the second problem poses an even greater threat to archivists' mission.

Historiography did not come to a halt with the advent of the new social history of the 1960s. The inevitable succession of "fashions" or trends among historians and other researchers is a permanent problem for archivists. We do not know, nor can we, what records future researchers will want. We can only attempt to estimate the near future, which we usually do by extrapolating the recent past; what Hans Booms (President of the German Federal Archive) twenty years ago called "appraisal by constructing a futurology of potential issues in historical scholarship."[2] However, among the newest shoots of the social history garden is a plant that archivists can only regard as a weed. The followers of "deconstruction" do not ask us to collect different records from heretofore. They call in question the entire entreprise of collecting any "important" documents, for they argue that there are no inherently significant documents. This attitude appears most starkly when expressed in the seemingly bland generalities of a textbook: "Clearly, then, historical facts as such have no intrinsic meaning; they take on meaning and significance only when they are organized and presented by historians [and/or archivists?] with a particular point of view."[3] If historians of the future will be the ones who endow documents with meaning, what need for an archive at all?

One counsel of comfort among archivists has been to reflect on the development of modern historiography. Look at how research and writing agendas have constantly changed. If you do not like what you see at the moment, wait for a decade or so, and there will be something new. The history of writing the history of the United States, for example, has gone through many changes, from the Civil War to our own day. Students of that "history of American history" often think of it in terms of a series of succeeding "schools," usually in conflict with each other. The differences among the schools encompass what is the proper scope of history (political history *vs.* economic history *vs.* social history), what is "knowable" about history (is there a *single* past of which we can have *certain* knowledge?), and whether the United States has been a unique society (or even civilization) or whether it is best understood by means of models developed for other societies. All three questions have profound implications for the sort of records that would be required to respond to them. For an understanding of current debates, we need first to review very briefly the succeeding "schools" in American historiography, then examine in more detail the main issues that have divided them, and finally ask whether a new consensus may be emerging to give coherence to American (or anyone else's) history.[4]

In the second half of the nineteenth century the transition began from the gifted amateur historian with a private income to the professional historian based in a university using research methods that claimed to be "scientific." The successors to the massive chronological narratives of George Bancroft and Francis Parkman could be found in universities from the 1870s onwards. These first self-consciously "professional" historians had lived through the Civil War and their principal preoccupation or "mood" in writing American history was Reconstruction. How had the Civil War come about?

How could the nation be healed in its aftermath? Their approach has also been characterized as "conservative evolutionism."[5] Certainly they were firmly in the "whig" tradition, showing how all of the past that was worth remembering had led to their particular present. In their commitment to professional history, they held firmly to a belief that the historians' duty was to write an objective account of the past. The best remembered is Ulrich B. Philips whose "scientific" (or at least statistical) approach to reconstructing the life of slaves from records left by plantation owners fits the reconstruction mood of disparaging the extremes of the abolitionists which were seen as the cause of the Civil War.

The first professional historians' claims of objectivity and their assumed conservatism were challenged after 1890 by a succession of "progressive" historians: F. J. Turner, Charles Beard, Vernon Parrington and Carl Becker. Against the seamless evolution of American history, they posited a history of continuous conflict, between "the people" and "the interests."[6] "The people" were almost always farmers, frontiersmen who embodied republican virtue. Their opponents — the urban, eastern bankers and monopolies — represented private economic interests seeking to capture the state and turn it to their personal benefit to the detriment of "the people."[7] The anti-federalists, Jeffersonian republicans, Jacksonian democrats, and the progressives and populists of their own era were the heroes of the "progressive" historians. Both Charles Beard and Carl Becker also challenged the idea that any written history (their own works included) could stand as an objective account of the past. The progressives thus broke with their predessors in three ways: the scope of history (expanded to include economic conflicts), the orientation of the historian (committed to reform, not a neutral social scientist), and — to a certain extent — the nature of the knowledge that history could yield (more relative than objective).[8]

In the 1940s there emerged a new school, sharply critical of the older progressive history. Beard's critique of the federalists and their constitution was itself critiqued and found wanting. Much of the "material interest" he had claimed to motivate the founding fathers could not be proven from the sources he had used.[9] Indeed the early twentieth-century progressives themselves came to be seen not as selfless moral guardians, but a displaced social group seeking to shore up their own status by posing as the nation's conscience.[10] In place of endemic conflict, the new historians — such as Richard Hofstadter, Daniel Boorstin and Louis Hartz — saw and sought to stress the continuities of American history.[11] Almost instantly dubbed the "consensus historians" they shared, rather than promoted by collective effort, the view that America had a unique and homogeneous culture in which conflicts were largely superficial and matters of detail.[12] John Higham has observed of them,

> Many, if not most, of the leading consensus historians were secularized, highly assimilated Jews. Themselves the sons of immigrants, they belonged to the first generation of Jewish students who encountered no serious obstacle in rising into the humanistic disciplines. How could they avoid perceiving the United States as an increasingly inclusive society resting on a universalistic value system?[13]

In the post-war Cold War mood, they were highly critical of what they took to be the relativism of the progressives. To the consensus historians, the lesson of the terrible war in Europe seemed to be that relativism bred nihilism, which opened the door to

totalitarian regimes. History properly written could indeed give us a reliable picture of the past.

This view had scarcely a decade of pre-eminence when it was assailed by what came to be called "the New Left" historians. The "old left" more often meant the few previous attempts to write Marxist American history, rather than the work of the progressives.[14] Eugene Genovese, Stephen Thernstrom, and William A. Williams were only a few of those in widely different spheres who attacked what they saw as a false consensus that tried to "write out" the constant conflict in American history. The New Left differed from the progressives, however, in identifying the sources of conflict not in what was now seen as a vague generalization ("the people"), but in the rather more specific categories of class, race and (somewhat later) gender. However those categories sparked a "new social history" that was far more complex than such a simple trinity might imply.

The new social history set out to write history "from the bottom up." It aimed to recover all those neglected by the narrow focus of past political and economic history. The great expansion of the numbers of professional historians in the 1960s and 1970s was matched by an explosion of new specialized fields: the urban working class, women, blacks (in or out of slavery) all found their historians (often in new journals for each specialty). Beyond that came histories of the family, childhood, the education system, churches (the latter two now usually understood as forms of social control to further the hegemonic interests of a rising middle class, in contrast to previous "institutional" histories), urban and regional histories. But not only were the topics new, the sources and approaches to those topics were also often new. To write history "from the bottom up" meant that one sought the direct testimony of the hitherto excluded: slave accounts of slavery, women's own contemporary reflections on their status and that of family, church and schools. Confronted with the problem of scarce sources that dealt with "marginalized groups," the new historians turned to oral history and quantitative analysis of records such as censuses, local directories and tax schedules. It was hoped that a significant part of the history of "the forgotten" could be captured in these new sources.[15]

The New Left differed from the progressives in their attitude to the reforming liberalism of America's protest movements. While the New Left historians had some sympathy, they were conscious of these movements' limitations and critical of their achievements. The attempts from Jefferson and Jackson to the populists and the progressives to limit the power of private business were seen as largely failures. The high tides of reform in 1900-1920 and 1933-1938 had established various regulatory bodies that had been captured by the regulated and used to further the consolidation of corporate power. The progressive model of re-establishing true laissez-faire competition seemed to the New Left a profound failure to understand the inherent inequality that even a reformed captialism would produce. At the same time, the "underside" of the progressives — their anti-semitism and racism especially — repelled the New Left, which sympathized with and was at times personally engaged in the civil rights movement of the late 1950s and 1960s.[16]

By the mid-1970s some of those disposed to the New Left approach began to take stock of their assault on consensus history. If they had largely displaced it, nonetheless it had not been completely buried. Despite the New Left historians' best efforts to find alternative understandings of American society, the lower classes did not seem to have

formed and sustained the sort of European class attitudes that were expected. Most Americans, it appeared, had accepted the values of a profoundly capitalist culture.[17] Some thought they could discern in these reassessments a new tendency which was dubbed "neo-consensus." Lawrence Goodwyn and Jeffrey Lustig (both writing about the "progressive era") set the conflicts of the populists and progressives within the context of a pervasive pan-American commitment to private property, personal economic and social mobility, and political liberalism.[18] The neo-consensus historians were said to differ from the consensus historians in that they reproached rather than celebrated the homogeneity of American culture. In particular they described the marked inequalities of power and wealth among Americans. But they could not follow the New Left in its belief that those economic and social realities had fundamentally sundered the American body politic into self-conscious classes, in which the one at the bottom held a rival belief system.

In the mid-1980s Thomas Haskell launched an impressive attack on the reductionism which had been implicit in much of the New Left critique of the "humanitarian sensibility" that had emerged in the late eighteenth century. New Left historians had sought to explain the campaigns to school the young, cure the insane, reform prisons, more effectively relieve the poor, and above all to end slavery as examples not of increased compassion or social conscience but as examples of the new industrial middle class's social control for the purpose of ensuring its own ideological hegemony. He sought to rebut Michel Foucault's argument that the aim of prison reform (for example) was "not to punish less, but to punish better." While granting some ground to Foucault, Haskell contended that "we must not lose sight of another truth, namely that to put a thief in jail is more humane than to burn him, hang him, maim him, or dismember him."[19] His search for less reductionist, more sophisticated descriptions of the links between economic and social change has attracted considerable critical interest.

Yet more significant than the continuing swings of the conflict-consensus pendulum since the 1950s has been the rapid specialization/fragmentation that has engrossed most historians. By the late 1980s you could no longer assume that an overarching synthesis of American history was even *wanted* by most historians (much less whether it was *possible*). As long ago as 1977, Greg Kealey warned that

> The alarming subdivision of social history into minuscule specialties has become a serious problem. Those of us who work on education history, immigration history, urban history, labour history, women's history, family history, or whatever must continue to see our work as interacting and forming part of a larger whole. Without this constant dialectic the new social history will not only fail to provide the desired synthesis but also runs the real danger of falsifying the past by fragmenting reality beyond experience.[20]

While the new social history had begun as an attempt to *include* the "forgotten," as these specializations developed, some of their practitioners began to question whether there was an indisputable *common* history into which their work could be integrated. Such integration came to look like an implicit statement of their specializations' inferiority to some other "higher" history, of which theirs was only one aspect.[21]

Particularly pointed were exchanges among the new historians, between the partisans of class and those of gender. Much influenced by Marxism, the upholders of class

claimed that it was the fundamental divide in American (as in everyone else's) history. The "integration" that would produce a new synthesis would be that which put class at the centre. Some feminist historians refused to accept the primacy of class. A number of Black historians also refused to acknowledge the primacy of class, as against race. Were either the Alien and Sedition Acts of traditional national political history, or the rise of early craft unions in northern cities of the new social history as important for Blacks as such "international" (non-American) events as the revolution in Haiti or the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies? Thus the trinity of the new social history came to seem less a godhead than a three-cornered fight.

Those who were outside as well as those who were inside the New Left generation by the end of the 1980s felt that the specialization had turned into fragmentation. Gertrude Himmelfarb, Carl Degler and Thomas Bender all warned of the new histories which refused to be integrated into someone else's scheme, each claiming to be first.[22] How could the partisans of a wide variety of specializations be brought to accept that there was some overarching theme into which each could fit without any sacrifice of significance? Carl Degler called for a new *national* history in which all specialties could find a place. Bender offered a history of "public culture" within the nation-state (frankly acknowledged as a value in itself), where the contest for control of that culture would include all players — not just the perceived winners. In some of these debates and critiques there re-emerged the debate over the possibility of writing objective history.

In the past there had been a series of arguments over whether history is, or should be, objective. The first generation of professional historians were appalled at the progressives' political axe-grinding. It has been argued that the influence of the progressives in American universities was limited by force of the professional historians' critique, even though their own substantive work was superseded.[23] Certainly the attack of the consensus historians, including Hofstadter, on the partisan stance of the progressives clearly held up the alternative of objective history. In Carl Becker, Hofstadter considered he had found a forthright defender of relativism. When the consensus historians themselves became subject to attacks from the rising New Left historians, many of the consensus historians (but *not* Hofstadter, significantly) sought to dismiss the new partisanship as no more deserving of serious attention than that of the old progressives. The apparent victory of the New Left generation seemed to be a vindication not only of new topics and new approaches in how to do history, but also of the stance of commitment.

The radical mood of writing about the "neglected" proudly asserted its bias as a positive thing. For some it seemed a short step from being committed, trying new topics and new methods, to reassessing the received notions of what constituted a "fact" and what meaning such a "fact" might have or be given. From the study of literature (where many had gone in search of new sources and new methods of reading sources), some the the new historians began to pick up "deconstruction," which was also boldly self-conscious.[24]

Until 1960 the principal trend across what are broadly known as "the humanities," was behaviourism. Its heartland lay in the "social sciences," which drew their intellectual underpinnings from the dominant positivist and empiricist philosophy of the natural sciences.[25] Armed with the prestige of "science," behaviourism boldly invaded the traditional humanities, such as history and literature. It seemed to offer objective,

scientific certainty in place of impressionistic and subjective opinion. In literature, John Crowe Ransom declared, "Criticism must become more scientific, or precise and systematic . . .".[26] Northrop Frye argued, "The critic should see literature as, like a science, a unified, coherent, and autonomous created form . . . not determined by any external historical process. This total body of literature can be studied through its larger structural principles . . .".[27] The structuralist critic "would penetrate to the determinate meaning of a text through the close analysis of the interaction of its words without the intervention of an authorial will."[28] But this exclusive focus on language soon led to the reactions of "post-structuralism" and "deconstruction." Language came to seem more a prison for author and reader alike, than a key to liberate the meaning of a text from subjectivity. If the relation between signifier and signified was arbitrary, if the two could never quite coincide, then there could be no determinacy of meaning.

To understand deconstruction's entry point into historiography, we need to recall the older debate between "objective" truth claims and their challengers. During the heyday of positivist social science, those historians who had applied that model believed they had a methodology which, if carefully followed, would invariably yield an absolutely accurate description of the past. Against that view arose various criticisms, whether called (or calling themselves) "subjective," "relative," or "historicist." These largely shared a common assumption that historians could not be "value-free social scientists," rigorously adhering to a strict dicotomy of "fact" and "value." The historians' own values (and those of contemporaries) fundamentally and often unconsciously not only shaped what data the historian selected, but also what significance was attached to it.

However not everyone was equally disposed to acquiesce in the new deconstructionist doctrine of indeterminate meaning. The subject matter or focus of study appeared to make some difference in whether a given scholar yielded to the radically relativist arguments of deconstruction. It was noticable in anthropology that those whose focus shifted from a study of behaviour to the larger questions of systems of meaning in a particular society were more inclined to adopt the new relativist view.[29] Similarly among historians, those whose focus was, say, diplomatic history, material culture, specific public events — broadly those who valued "archival 'finds'" — held more to the idea that some objectivity was possible.[30] By contrast those historians who focused primarily on intellectual history or the history of ideas were more likely to believe that any objective account was impossible (and those who claimed any objectivity were suspect).[31] By the late 1970s the new social history also included deconstructionists who denied that any "fact" had "meaning." All "meanings" were assigned by the historian. The result was a far more radical relativism than had characterized the older historicism of Becker.

The radical relativism of decontructed history, however, has not been the last word. Even Eric Monkkonen in his article, "The Dangers of Synthesis," turns out not to be opposed to *all* syntheses. He is dead set against "popularly oriented syntheses, which, either through narrative closure or scholarly ignorance, stop or retard fledgling fields of research." But he wants to see "professional research-oriented syntheses that will act as creative openings for more ideas."[32] Daniel Joseph Singal is one of those who believe that a new synthesis has been emerging through the rapid growth of the 1960s to the 1980s, which seems to others to have produced only chaos. Unlike the New Left, Singal considers that ideology has emerged in American history not as a source of conflict but (most of the time) as a source of cohesion. "Not ideological conflict, in short, but rather a conception of continuous ideological change lies at the heart of this mode of

interpretation."[33] While the nation is still the unit of analysis and its political life still looms large, it is the "public culture" or "ideology as a cultural system" to which our attention is directed.[34]

Singal prizes this synthesis especially as it seems to him the product of a multifaceted specialization.

> Here, then, is the pattern of ideological change that the present generation of historians, working independently of one another, has collectively set forth. It expressly challenges the consensus school thesis of a past marked by continuous agreement on fundamental principles, yet it does retain elements of the consensus approach. Indeed, a dialectician might well view the synthesis as a summation of both progressive and consensus historiography, since it allows for both ideological conflict and consensus, although set in alternating periods. Implicit in its explanatory scheme is a rhythm whereby a relative consensus exists for a time, then clashes with a new ideology that is starting to replace it, only to give way finally to what becomes the new consensus.[35]

For Canadians, however, it is the process and methodology, more than the content, of this new synthesis that is of most interest. What Singal has described is the autonomous convergence of independent scholars' conclusions in a spontaneous synthesis. For some, this holds the answer to the radical relativism of the deconstructionists.

In *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*, Peter Novick traces the conflict between those who claimed that history could offer an objective account of the past and those who argued that all history is always tainted by the contemporary concerns of its writers. For Novick the conflict appeared to have ended in indisputable victory for the "relativists". The victory, as he sees it, of the deconstructionists left him in a state of dispair: "As a broad community of discourse, as a community of scholars united by common aims, common standards, and common purposes, the discipline of history has ceased to exist."[36] In his review essay of Novick's book, James Kloppenberg refused to join in the lament. Between "objectivism" and "relativism," Kloppenberg posited a third way. He pointed to Thomas Haskell's belief in "a moderate historicism" that could shelter "the principles that our culture will continue to cherish," recognizing that these are rooted in convention rather than timeless truth.[37] Novick, indeed, had been aware of this option — that authority could reside in "communities of the competent" — but dismissed it as inadequate since it could not offer the necessary degree of certainty to make history (or any other discipline) worthwhile. However, in the broader debates over the possibility of reliable knowledge, arguments have moved on to what might be the necessary criteria for the existence of a meaningful 'community of the competent'.[38] What is striking is that Singal and other scholars have arrived at a "consensus of the competent" view of American history, largely independent of the theoretical debate.

Is that option sufficient? For all its methodological sophistication, the synthesis offered by Singal remains primarily a national political history. Granted "political" has now been broadened somewhat, under the rather hazy concept of "culture" or "public culture." While an advance over the previous attempts at a synthesis of American history, Singal's model still narrows its scope (from the breadth of the new social history) in order to achieve a degree of coherence.

However, there is more for archivists to learn from these debates than just the current state of play in reinterpreting American history. The "relativism" or "historicism" which has shaken history as a discipline in the past decade has also impinged on attempts to develop archival theory. Burke's student, Gregg Kimball, has argued that archival theory "was in part a product of intellectual and specifically historiographical, theoretical frameworks."[39] In particular he traces the impact of historicism and positivism on the European archival theory from which both Canadian and American theory have sprung. Kimball is probably correct in his observation, "For many archivists, archival theory is simply a set of common sense principles to govern arrangement and description. These principles are based in administrative expediency and accepted practice."[40] But as archivists face historical researchers who are increasingly self-conscious about their methods and the tentative value of their results, it will no longer be adequate to strike a pose as disinterested curator of the records. We must be prepared in St. Paul's words to "offer reasons for the hope that is in us." As Frank Burke keeps reminding us, having some grasp of the theoretical issues that records keeping involves is becoming less an after-hours hobby and more of a survival mechanism.[41]

The continuing revolutions in historiography have had their greatest archival impact on the debates over appraisal criteria. Some archivists seem either unaware historiographic changes have taken place in how historians "do" history, or unable to grasp the archival implications of the changes that have taken place. This is reflected often in a language that speaks of "sound criteria", implying a simple and obvious dicotomy between "sound" and "unsound."[42] Once one acknowledges that significant changes have taken place, then "continuity" in appraisal critera becomes problematic. One issue (of several) that arose in the controversy over "re-appraisal" was the impact over time of a changing historiography on appraisal criteria. Leonard Rapport argued for regular systematic review of accessions in part because "appraisal standards can change."

> Appraising is at best an inexact science, perhaps more an art; and a conscientious appraiser, particularly an imaginative one with an awareness of research interests and trends, is apt to know nights of troubled soul searching.[43]

To the objection that "no matter how often a series qualifies for continued retention, it would take only a single unfavourable reappraisal to wipe it out," he replied, "most public records are destroyed without ever seeing the inside of an archives; and they are destroyed in accordance with whatever standards apply at the time of their one and only appraisal."[44] The most direct rebuttal of his thesis was perhaps not the most convincing.

Karen Benedict explicitly acknowledged the subjective character of appraisal and even the impossibility of objective criteria.

> Since our view of what is of enduring value changes constantly, to permit regular reappraisal (actually rejudgment) is to sanction the destruction of records according to transitory criteria. To argue otherwise requires the conviction that there is some scientific method of appraisal, which would compel archivists to agree with the results of its appraisal.[45]

She cites however, as referants, articles by Becker and Beard over a half a century old (but reflecting a historiographical trend even older). Her logic amounts to absolutizing

whatever criteria that prevail at the moment the document is accepted: "their accessioning defines their archival value."[46] When she says, "There is some hubris involved in substituting one's own judgment for that of an earlier appraiser, based purely on subjective grounds," she seems oblivious to the hubris of thinking that only the *first* appraiser is without hubris, the archivist whose inevitable subjectivity must be enshrined for all time.[47] While the esteemed Hans Booms comes to a similar conclusion, at least he makes clear that he understands what he is saying.

> . . . Archivists must not follow the value concepts of their own time period, but rather, those of the time from which the material originated. . . . Archivists need a constant to make their source selections, for once made, such selections are irreversible. . . . The extent of archival subjectivity and societal conditioning evident in this documentation model and its influence on our conception of history seems rather frightening. . . . [But] It goes without saying that the formation of a documentary heritage is a subjective and therefore socially conditioned process.[48]

More diffident than Benedict, Richard Cox and Helen Samuels present a research agenda which begins thus: "archivists have inadequate information about these traditional appraisal methods."[49] In line with recent attempts in American historiography to find coherence, they look for "a professionwide consensus on priorities or needs."[50] They call for a much broader basis for appraisal:

> When archivists conduct research they logically integrate their use of the published, manuscript, visual, and other sources. But when archivists appraise, they often fail to make the same connections. Lacking a knowledge of the availability of published sources and the type and quality of information they provide, archivists have yet to develop appraisal procedures that include the evaluation of other sources of information.[51]

The published responses of Frank Boles and Frank Burke were sharply critical of Cox and Samuels. The former especially was disappointed at their failure to face up to the central problem.

> Determining how archivists appraise is the critical need. Without a much fuller understanding of the way in which archivists determine what to keep and what to destroy, the appaisal process, as well as the whole concept of adequate documentary heritage, will be a poorly defined decision that archival and nonarchival critics can rightly conclude rests uncomfortably close to whim and capriciousness.[52]

Yet Boles's own essay on appraisal sought to escape the dilemma articulated so well by Booms —

> In order to be able to assign value in a practical way during the process of appraisal, archivists need one or more aspects by which they can gradually "find" or perceive the relative value of their archival records in relation to value coordinates. Only with reference to phenomena whose value has been established beyond question can the archivist place documentary sources in relationship to one another so that they can be compared with one another and situated within a hierarchy of value.[53]

— by merely denying that value-laden choices are being made.

> Tools like collecting policies . . . all call for the archivist to make and implement policy, not render value judgments. . . . To implement a collecting policy by focusing upon political and agricultural records is not to render a value judgment regarding the relative importance of economic or social documentation. It is simply a policy decision made among several attractive alternatives.[54]

Burke boldly begins with a conception of archivists as definers of an age, in tune with Booms's vision.

> It may be true that archivists lead the historians — that is, what we save is what they discover — on the premise that if there are no documents there can be no history. But that tradition comes essentially out of the duty of archivists to determine what is the shear line in the course of human events; where is the critical change, who is the new pacesetter, what is happening to establish the new pattern.[55]

Yet he then abruptly asks,

> Have we missed something, or are we not perceiving that researchers, and especially historians, have changed their *modus operandi* in regards to documentary sources? There is evidence of this in the reduced sales of documentary editions, and the elimination of academic courses in historical method and the use of documentary sources. There appear to be fewer visits to the documentary search rooms of repositories. Instead of studying how much and what kind of documentation should be saved, perhaps archivists should study what research methodology is being employed, what the historians are doing for sources, and then whether it is appropriate, in spite of their methods, to continue to retain or search out certain documentation.[56]

This backward somersault lands him in the previous decade, when Gerald Ham worried that

> . . . this [custodial] tradition, of course, leaves the archivist too closely tied to the vogue of the academic marketplace. For example, only after historians rediscovered the importance of the city in American history did a few so-called urban archives come into existence. . . . Most researchers are caught in their own concerns and do not worry about all the history that needs to be written: yet in terms of documentary preservation this is precisely what the archivist must do. Small wonder then, that archival holdings too often reflected narrow research interests rather than the broad spectrum of human experience. If we cannot transcend these obstacles, then the archivist will remain at best nothing more than a weathervane moved by the changing winds of historiography.[57]

Well, we have not transcended the obstacles in the intervening sixteen years.

When successive "schools" have thrown up new research agendas, archivists have tended to treat these as additive. While the multiplication of agendas has strained archival resources, it did not seem to present problems of principle.[58] The newer schools

did not seek to destroy (i.e. deaccession) the sources used by the preceding schools. Indeed they often sought to pose newer questions to the older sources; even while demanding that archives acquire and preserve a newer and different type of source. The first problem, then, posed for archivists by the continuing multiplication of specialized/fragmented fields of social history is one of resources and priorities: we cannot search for and keep what everyone wants. The second problem involves the very existence of any archives.

Deconstruction presents a challenge of a different sort. If all documents are without any inherent value, if value is mainly imparted by the reader (whether historian or archivist); then appraisal is entirely and perhaps exclusively subjective. Why should public money be spent to preserve a set of documents that have clear significance only to those few who are employed to chose them? Archivists have sometimes modestly cast themselves in the role of the tail, wagged by the researchers' dog; providing records for someone else's research agenda. What if history comes to be seen not as a dog at all, but a cat — a manx cat?

Notes

* Abbreviations used throughout the notes are as follows:

American Archivist AA
American Historical Review AHR
Journal of American History JAH

1 Frank Burke, "The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States," AA 44 (Winter 1981), pp. 42-43.

2 Hans Booms, "Society and the Formation of a Documentary Heritage: Issues in the Appraisal of Archival Sources," *Archivaria* 24 (Summer 1987), p. 92.

3 Allen F. Davis and Harold D. Woodman (ed.), *Conflict and Consensus in Early American History* (Toronto, 1984), 6th edition, p. xxi.

4 Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York, 1988). Thomas L. Haskell, *The Emergence of Professional Science: The American Social Science Association and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Authority* (Urbana, 1977) and his "Professionalism vs. Capitalism: R. H. Tawney, Emile Durkheim, and C. S. Peirce on the Disinterestedness of Professional Communities," in his (ed.), *The Authority of Experts: Studies in History and Theory* (Bloomington, 1984). Still of interest are older histories of 'the history of writing American history': Michael Kraus, *The Writing of American History* (Norman, 1953) especially on Bancroft and Parkman (pp. 70-108) and Harvey Wish, *The American Historian: A Social-Intellectual History of the Writing of the American Past* (New York, 1960), especially on the transition to "scientific history," pp. 157-176. For the current debate, see for example Richard H. Brown's article "Positivism, Relativism, and Narrative in the Logic of the Historical Sciences," AHR 92 (October 1987), pp. 908-920; and the other articles of that issue which are cited below.

5 James T. Kloppenberg, "Objectivity and Historicism, A Century of American Historical Writing," AHR 94 (October 1989), p. 1013.

6 Melvyn Stokes, "American Liberalism and the Neo-Consensus School," *Journal of American Studies* 20 (1986), p. 449. See also Kloppenberg, op. cit., p. 1013.

7 Carl Degler notes the farm-rural orientation in 'the last of the progressives', C. Vann Woodward and his intellectual progeny: "Apparently, Woodward's students have not yet been able to emancipate themselves from that love affair with farmers with which Woodward began his scholarly career." Carl Degler, "The Revival in Reconstruction History," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 83 (1984), p. 226.

8 Kloppenberg, op. cit., pp. 1015-1017, argues that Hofstadter was in error to read Becker's historicism as relativism. Kloppenberg also argues that Novick exaggerates the objectivist-relativist divide.

9 Robert E. Brown, *Charles Beard and the Constitution: A Critical Analysis of "An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution"* (Princeton, 1956); but note though, R. A. McQuire, "Rehabilitating Charles Beard," *Journal of Economic History* 44 (June 1984), pp. 509-519.

10 Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York, 1968). Robert M.

Collins, "The Originality Trap: Richard Hofstadter on Populism," H 76 (June 1989), pp. 150-167, shows convincingly that Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform* was read as arguing a much stronger case for status politics than Hofstadter himself had intended.

11 Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York, 1955). Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York, 1955). Also of the same general outlook was Rowland Bertoff's *An Unsettled People* (New York, 1971).

12 John Higham, "The Cult of the 'American Consensus'", *Commentary* 27 (February 1959), pp. 93-100.

13 John Higham, "Changing Paradigms: The Collapse of Consensus History," JAH 76 (September 1989), pp. 464. Daniel Joseph Singal had earlier noted Hofstadter's own experience of assimilation and the values it taught him which also framed his approach to American history, in "Beyond Consensus: Richard Hofstadter and American Historiography," AHR 89 (October 1984), p. 979.

14 Stokes regards the label "New Left" as necessary to distinguish the 1960s generation of historians from "the old left tradition of the progressives," op. cit., p. 452. However the issue of the JAH 76 (September 1989) devoted to "Radical Historians and the Crisis in American History, 1959-1980," most often posits the "old left" as marxists; see for example Carl Degler, "What Crisis, Jon?", pp. 467-470 and Herbert Aptheker, "Welcoming Jonathan Wiener's Paper, with a Few Brief Dissents," pp. 443-445.

15 For examples, see the series of articles in *Social Science History* 10 (Spring 1986) on the twentieth anniversary of the publication of Stephen Thernstrom's *Poverty and Progress*. Alongside Edward Pessen's article, "*Poverty and Progress: A Critique*," pp. 5-13, should be put the even stronger criticism of Eric Monkkonen, "The Dangers of Synthesis," AHR 91 (December 1986), pp. 1149-50.

16 Stokes, op. cit., pp. 452-3. Kloppenberg, op. cit., p. 1014. Collins, op. cit., pp. 155-5, 161.

17 John Patrick Diggins, "Comrades and Citizens: New Mythologies in American Historiography," AHR 90 (June 1985), p. 625.

18 Stokes, op. cit., p. 453. However it must be noted that the younger Hofstadter who first forged the model of consensus did not celebrate that consensus; only in the mid- and late 1960's did Hofstadter begin to put a positive interpretation on the American consensus. See Collins, op. cit., 155 and especially Singal, op. cit., p. 983.

19 Haskell set out his thesis in a two part article to which there were two replies, followed by his lengthy rebuttal: Thomas Haskell, "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Part I," AHR 90 (April 1985), pp. 339-361; "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Part II," AHR 90 (June 1985), pp. 547-566; David Brion Davis, "Reflections on Abolitionism and Ideological Hegemony," AHR 92 (October 1987), pp. 797-812; John Ashworth, "Relationship Between Capitalism and Humanitarianism," AHR 92 (October 1987), pp. 813-828; and Thomas Haskell, "Convention and Hegemonic Interest in the Debate over Antislavery: A Reply to Davis and Ashworth," AHR 92 (October 1987), pp. 829-878.

20 Gregory Kealey, (review), *Canadian Historical Review* 58 (September 1977), p. 317. More recently, in his survey of Canadian history since 1960, Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History* (Toronto, 1986) second edition, pp. 318-320, is more sanguine that the tendencies to continuity (if not synthesis) will continue to dominate the writing of Canadian history.

21 In particular note the arguments of Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Some Reflections on the New History," AHR 94 (June 1989), pp. 664-665 and set these against the argument in Kloppenberg, op. cit., p. 1025.

22 See for examples Carl Degler, "In Pursuit of an American History," AHR 92 (February 1987), pp. 1-12 and "Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis: The South, The North, and the Nation," *Journal of Southern History* 53 (February 1987), pp. 3-18; Thomas Bender, "Wholes and Parts, The Need for Synthesis in American History," JAH 73 (June 1986), pp. 120-136; and Signal, op. cit., p. 997. Sue Holbert's 1988 presidential remarks noted the fragmented state of the history profession only in passing to reassure American archivists that their profession was not alone in being fragmented. Sue Holbert, "Searching for Common Ground," AA 52 (Spring 1989), p. 145.

23 Kloppenberg, op. cit., p. 1013.

24 Ibid., p. 1025.

25 For an extended discussion of the impact on political science see Eugene Miller, "Positivism, Historicism, and Political Enquiry," *American Political Science Review* 66 (September 1972), pp. 796-873, which includes the comments of David Braybrooke and Alexander Rosenberg, "Comment: Getting the War News Straight: The Actual Situation in the Philosophy of Science," Richard Rudner, "Comment: On Evolving Standard Views in Philosophy of Science," and Martin Landau,"Comment: On Objectivity," to which is added Eugene Miller, "Rejoinder to 'Comments' by David Braybrooke and Alexander Rosenberg, Richard Rudner and Martin Landau."

26 John Crowe Ransom, "Criticism, Inc.," *The World's Body* (New York, 1938), p. 329.

27 Interestingly, Frye comments, "History began as a chronicle; but the difference between the old chronicler and the modern historian is that to the chronciler the events he recorded were also the *structure* of his history, whereas the historian sees these events as historical phenomena, to be connected with a conceptual framework not only broader but different in shape from them." However his reference points are most usually to the sciences: "Criticism seems to be badly in need of a coordinating principle, a central hypothesis which, like the theory of evolution in biology, will see the phenomena it deals with as parts of a whole." Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), pp. 15-16.
28 Novick, op. cit., p. 542.
29 Ibid., p. 554.
30 Kloppenberg, op. cit., p. 1017.
31 For an example of decontruction at work on the history of ideas, see John Gunnell, *Political Theory and Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1979) and his *Between Philosophy and Politics: The Alienation of Political Theory* (Amherst, 1986). On the wider debates over the purpose and possibility of any "history of ideas", see John E. Towes, "Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience," AHR 92 (October 1987), pp. 879-907.
32 Monkkonen, op. cit., p. 1156-7.
33 Singal, op. cit., p. 999.
34 Singal, op. cit., pp. 997-999. Bender, op. cit., p. 126.
35 Ibid., p. 1001-1002.
36 Novick, op. cit., p. 628.
37 Kloppenberg, op. cit., p. 1027.
38 See for example Mark R. Schwehn, "Religion and the Life of Learning," *First Things 1* (August/September 1990), pp. 34-43 which offers a critical analysis of both philosopher Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and educator Parker Palmer's *To Know as We are Known.*
39 Gregg D. Kimball, "The Burke-Cappon Debate: Some Further Criticisms and Considerations for Archival Theory," AA 48 (Fall 1985), p. 373. Other contributions to the debate had been Lester J. Cappon, "What, Then, Is There To Theorize About?," AA 45 (Winter 1982), pp. 19-25 and Harold T. Pinkett, "American Archival Theory: The State of the Art," AA 44 (Summer 1981), pp. 217-222; both the latter opposing explicit theorizing.
40 Ibid., p. 375.
41 Frank Burke, "Commentary," AA 51 (Winter and Spring 1988), pp. 49-50.
42 See for example, Karen Benedict, "Invitation to a Bonfire: Reappraisal and Deaccessioning of Records as Collection Management Tools in an Archives — A Reply to Leonard Rapport," AA 47 (Winter 1984), pp. 43-49.
43 Leonard Rapport, "No Grandfather Clause: Reappraising Acessioned Records," AA 44 (Spring 1981), pp. 48-49.
44 Ibid., p. 46.
45 Benedict, op. cit., p. 45.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Booms, op. cit., pp. 104-106.
49 Richard Cox and Helen Samuels, "The Archivist's First Responsibility: A Research Agenda to Improve the Identification and Retention of Records of Enduring Value," AA 51 (Winter and Spring 1988), p. 30.
50 Ibid., p. 32.
51 Ibid., p. 33.
52 Frank Boles, "Commentary," AA 51 (Winter and Spring 1988), p. 44.
53 Booms, op. cit., p. 82.
54 Frank Boles, "Mix Two Parts Interest to One Part Information and Appraise Until Done: Understanding Contemporary Record Selection Processes," AA 50 (Summer 1987), p. 359.
55 Burke, "Commentary," op. cit., p. 48.
56 Ibid.
57 Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," AA 38 (January 1975), p. 8.
58 Of course *some* of the newest methodologies have indeed raised questions of principle for archivists. Take oral history, for example. Some of its devotees hold that archives should not merely *acquire* documents, but also *document* (certain experiences, events or tendencies). That challenge blurs the traditional line in archival theory between "keeper of the records" and "creator of the records."