

# Überlieferungsbildung: *Keeping Archives as a Social and Political Activity*

by HANS BOOMS\*

As I learned from my survey of the Canadian professional literature, my 1972 article on archival appraisal, published in a fine translation by Hermina Joldersma and Richard Klumpenhouwer as “Society and the Formation of a Documentary Heritage: Issues in the Appraisal of Archival Sources,”<sup>1</sup> may have found some resonance in Canadian and American discussions of the subject. I realize that not everyone may be familiar with the article, and I do not have space to recapitulate it in its entirety; nevertheless, because some of the ideas in the article are necessary for an understanding of my remarks, I shall refer to it here and there as necessary.

My basic premise in 1972 was — as it still is today—that in building the documentary heritage of society, archivists must first of all establish the value of records before they can decide what to keep and what to destroy. For if one thing has always been perfectly clear to archivists — at least since the turn of the century — it is that they cannot possibly take in everything conveyed to them by the records creators, simply because the volume of records is too great. And so, in 1972, I posed the inevitable question: how and by what measure do archivists recognize what should be kept and what not? I soon became convinced that the answer could not be found in the records themselves, for archival value is not intrinsic to the record, and generally cannot be established there. In order to be able to appraise the value of records, archivists must bring with them the concepts they need in order to make the judgement: *this* belongs to the documentary heritage, while *that* does not. But where do archivists get these value concepts, and how are such ideas developed? How do archivists attain the standards by which they can identify the records worthy of being designated as part of the documentary record? In 1972, I made a critical analysis of the efforts of German archivists to articulate a theory of value which would guide them in the formation of the documentary heritage. It is not possible to repeat the details of that analysis here, but I would like to give at least a brief overview.

From the 1920s to the 1940s, German archivists generally held the view that they should be guided by two experiences in their appraisal decisions: on the one hand, by their experience as practising archivists, which taught them, for example, to identify and remove duplicate material; on the other hand, by their experience as historians, which

gave them the conviction that they could recognize intuitively what was valuable and what was not. This was the age of historicism, and both archivists and historians pursued their work more subconsciously than consciously, in accordance with the social values of the day; in accordance with, as one would have said at the time, “self-evident” value principles. Intellectual views ranged from conservative to liberal, but they were above all nationalistic. So concepts such as “state,” “nation” and “the people,” were supposed to serve as the standards by which archivists assessed the value of records. Those who did not agree with these prevalent assumptions about society were considered social outcasts, and records which — more out of an emotional than an intellectual appeal — did not conform to these principles, were of course not considered worthy of archival preservation.

There were nevertheless critics among Prussian archivists. These critics eventually acknowledged that the value concepts of nation, state and people, were so abstract that in fact they could not be applied to the process of determining the value of records in any practical way. Additionally, it began to dawn on such archivists that in this process they were indeed relying mainly on their own personal perspectives, shaped by so-called “self-evident” value principles, which were in fact the political values of the contemporary ruling social class.

Moreover, archivists began to recognize that they did not so much need to preserve the documentary heritage for current historical research as for that in the future. They therefore needed to evaluate the record according to its usefulness for future historical inquiry. As a result, archivists have long held the dream of “anticipating the needs and issues of the distant future and to preserve everything which might meet those needs and issues.” However, this kind of archival futurology was doomed to failure, since it required archivists to be clairvoyants.

Finally, in the 1950s, German archivists gave up the search for a valid appraisal theory and for standards of value which would serve as reliable guides in building the documentary heritage. They retreated to the application of formal methods and processes, thereby relinquishing any valid judgement about the value of the record’s content. They argued that archivists had to be satisfied with merely documenting the activities of all those administrative bodies operating within the acquisition scope of their archives. The goal in building the documentary heritage was to be the documentation of the sum of administrative activities. In this manner, they thought they could escape the quagmire of content value. Incidentally, Theodore Schellenberg’s book, *The Appraisal of Modern Public Records*<sup>2</sup>, appeared in the United States at about the same time. His recommendations were valuable for the development of appraisal methodology, but again, did not really advance the archivist’s ability to identify archival value.

These methods of appraisal based on form assumed that every government activity was necessarily worth documenting. In the end, however, this approach failed to solve the problem of record volume. In the 1950s, German archivists tried to remedy this situation with another policy relating to record form: since the volume of records was too great, and one simply could not keep the records of all agencies, only the records of the most important agencies should be preserved. When confronted with the problem of determining which agencies were the most important, German archivists proposed a solution based on form rather than value: the most significant agencies were those at the

top of the organization's hierarchy. They operated on the assumption that the documentary value of the record increased with the position of the record-creating agency within the organization. In my opinion, this is not a value standard for conducting an appraisal; one cannot, for example make the *a priori* assumption that records from a president's office, such as in the Federal Republic of Germany, are necessarily more significant than those from the office concerned with social security, even though the latter is on a much lower administrative level.

Finally, in this "unending drama" of archival efforts in Germany to resolve the question of value, the Marxists in the 1960s announced that they, aided by the precepts of dialectical materialism, had found the solution to the "problème-clef de l'archivistique moderne" (as Bautier called it)<sup>3</sup>. Supported by Soviet archival theory, East German archivists developed a school of archival thought founded on the following principle: "Dialectical and historical materialism is the scientific basis for the development and application of uniform value principles"<sup>4</sup> in archives. This principle, they claimed, offered archivists "scientific standards for determining the value of records."

On this basis, and with ideological arrogance, they declared repeatedly in their archival journal that Marxist archives had moved ahead of West German archives by "an entire historical epoch"; furthermore — and here also Canadian archives were implicated—that archives in "capitalist countries" had "no real solutions" for "the problems of the evaluation of information and the overall problem of archival value." "A true solution for archival value," they proclaimed, "is, in the final analysis, only possible under the conditions of a socialist society."<sup>5</sup>

It was this arrogance, displayed over and over again, which in 1971 prompted me to write the article I mentioned at the outset. At that time, I tried to show that operating behind this school of thought, despite its Marxist-Leninist camouflage, were the same theories of appraisal value which the Prussian archivists had espoused in the 1920s. I also demonstrated how Marxist value theory was, at best, nothing more than an historical-philosophical statement of faith; at worst, an empty shell of speculation painted over with a dogmatic gloss.<sup>6</sup> Needless to say, my East German colleagues were not happy with my analysis and they took every opportunity to attack it.

Nevertheless, at the conference of German archivists in East Berlin in March 1991, former GDR archivists conceded that the notion that "the real solution to the question of archival value is only possible under the conditions of a socialist society was a chimera."<sup>7</sup> And another colleague from the former German Democratic Republic declared in discussion that "the attempt to build a Marxist-Leninist archival science has failed miserably."<sup>8</sup>

So far, I have tried to outline attempts made by German archivists between 1920 and 1970 to solve the problem of value in building the documentary heritage. What these attempts ought to do, however, is once again clearly reveal the essence and significance of the link between individuals and the values of their society. Society's values are in turn subject to ongoing, progressive changes which can sometimes suddenly reveal themselves; for example, when we compare the moral standards of the 1960s with those of the 1980s.

However, are archivists not faced with a dilemma in their efforts to shape the documentary heritage? Archivists are human beings: as an *animal social*, the archivist

will unavoidably appraise records according to those subjective opinions and ideas which have been acquired as part of the mindset of one's own time. But the records which archivists appraise are older, originating from a time which placed emphasis on different values. Are today's archivists, as well as tomorrow's archivists, not in danger of deforming, if not subverting, the documentary heritage? Yet how can archivists free themselves from the socially conditioned prejudices formed by contemporary value structures, or, at the very least, gain some distance from them?

Older archivists of course will retain their memories, because, as contemporaries of those events which are documented in the records, they will have experienced them. But we are all mere mortals, and with the passing of time, memory begins to develop large gaps and become less and less reliable. This poses a special problem for the younger archivists, who are not yet aware of the events or were not yet even born. Twenty years ago, I looked for a way out by advising archivists who wished to do justice to the records to orient themselves to the values of the time in which the record was created. I argued then that this could be accomplished by analysing opinions published at the time, which reflected the values of the records creators' contemporaries living in a democratic society. In 1972, I attempted to put this theory into practice in my so-called "documentation plan."

Briefly, the nature of this plan was as follows: on the basis of contemporary opinion, as expressed in published statements, archivists prepare an analysis of political events of a certain time — "political" being understood in the broadest possible way. From this they form a picture of the events, actions, failures and developments, that were considered important and significant. At the same time, because of the perspective gained by historical distance, they will also be able to recognize which events later proved to be insignificant, or which developments have led nowhere. Those records which best document the elements identified in the documentation plan, and which in the process of archival appraisal prove to be most useful as raw social data for historical research, are judged to be valuable documentary records. At that time, I proposed that such a documentation plan should be developed by an archival team, reviewed by an advisory board, approved and published. Through this process, archivists could achieve a socially sanctioned and verifiable documentary model which could be critically reviewed by scholarly analysis.

I suspect that at this point my audience will want to know whether this documentation plan was ever implemented, and, if so, how. I have to admit, frankly and unequivocally, that, in western Europe, it was not implemented at all. As far as I can determine, no archival contribution to the theory of appraisal has appeared in Europe since 1972. That is to say, nothing until 30 June 1989, the date of my retirement. On that day I was presented with a *Festschrift*.<sup>9</sup> This volume contained the very first response to my proposals, in fact a response from the German Federal Archives, and from a colleague who for ten years had directed the appraisal section of the federal archives. The substance of his response? Complete rejection.

My proposal had been to build the documentary heritage according to an established documentation plan, accountable to the public and critically verified by the historical method of scholarly research. This colleague had the following to say about my proposal: "If there ever had been an attempt to implement this documentation plan, it would not have been sanctioned by society, nor could it have been effective in any

practical way. Complex human value concepts can hardly be harmonized to reflect the whole of society.””

I do not wish to polemicize about the “complex human value concepts,” for which Büttner and others, since, have assumed I was aiming. My documentation plan was supposed to establish references to real events which had become history, and not to attempt to construe complex value concepts, as ideologues and armchair philosophers are wont to do. But on another point I agree with Büttner completely: it is not possible for us, as archivists, to secure public sanction for a documentation plan. In 1969, I advocated the principle that it is necessary for archives actively to promote public scrutiny of, and input into, their work as much as possible; for two-and-a-half decades, I attempted to put this principle into practice in the German Federal Archives—I believe with some success. As president of the International Council on Archives (1984-1988), I tirelessly preached to politicians around the world about the significance of archives for society. But I have in the meantime lost confidence in the idea of making an archival documentation plan the subject of effective, perhaps even passionate, public debate.

With this, the need for an advisory board to review the documentation plan also falls by the wayside. I am all the happier about this, as the experience over twenty years of working with historical advisory boards and commissions convinced me that it is virtually impossible to bring any significant number of academic historians to a consensus. In appraisal matters, they always tend to consider those records which are the most useful for their own research as the most important. I also learned to regard with scepticism the advice of the officials who produced the records, for among them are many timid persons who would prefer to destroy everything in which they may have been involved, as well as many who would like to keep everything.

Let me return briefly to Büttner’s statement which I quoted a few moments ago, and restate that part of the sentence in which he speculated, “If there ever *had been* an attempt to implement this documentation plan . . . .” Today I can assert that such implementation was not only attempted, but completed. In fact, a good number of documentation plans were developed. I was amazed when I first learned where this had been done: in the former German Democratic Republic! Precisely the same East German communist archivists who had been battling me for years, had also been industriously working to realize in a practical form exactly the kind of documentation plan I had proposed. As they admitted at that March 1991 conference in East Berlin,<sup>11</sup> they had simply renamed the plan so that they would not have to acknowledge me. They called it “a profile of a documentation framework for the state archives of the German Democratic Republic from 1945 to 1981.” They had finished this plan in 1984 and marked it “classified,” so that only in March 1991 was I able to set eyes on it for the first time. Based on this “profile of a documentation framework,” all other state archives of the German Democratic Republic were to prepare documentation profiles for their particular jurisdictions.

How were these documentation profiles used by East German archivists? I posed this question at the March conference. The frank answer I received from them was that not a single file had been appraised using the “profile of a documentation framework.” It had been formulated too abstractly to be applied in any practical way.

If one studies this “profile of a documentation framework,” as I have, it soon becomes clear why it could not have worked. Dutifully following my proposal, the GDR archivists studied published public opinion polls in order to establish the value structure on which to base their profile. But such things did not really exist in a communist country, ruled by a dictatorship and without freedom of speech. Since East German newspapers published little else besides that which the Politburo of the Socialist Unity Party ordered journalists to write, the “profile of a documentation framework” was padded with the slogans of Socialist Unity Party congress resolutions, along with the usual Politburo directives and press releases. To give but one example: according to the “profile of a documentation framework,” East German archivists were to construct a documentary heritage for the last years of the 1980s which proved that the German Democratic Republic had reached the highest stage of socialism, the true manifestation of, as it was called, a victorious, fully developed socialist society. This stage, however, took in precisely the period when it was obvious that the system was breaking down and that economic ruin was imminent. How could such a documentation plan have been applied to the appraisal of the records? For contrary to what was contained in the records, the plan did not mirror social reality, but only the ideologically dogmatic sham world of Marxist-Leninist socialism. This “profile of a documentation framework” is an extreme example of how an archival documentation plan, and archival work in general, is linked to the prevailing social order.

Nevertheless, how should one appraise the documents created under such conditions? We have seen that the documentary profiles were not suitable. As far as I can predict— for we do not yet have any experience in this approach—when appraising the records of a communist régime, we have to proceed very cautiously, using the value standards of our democratically-based, pluralistic society. Archivists cannot, as no one could, place themselves within a value system that has entirely different standards. Certainly, the documentation profiles themselves would have to be included among the records, so that future historians will be able to perceive the discrepancy between the documentation profiles and that which the records document. This in itself is evidence of the great gap which separated appearance from reality in communist states.

I have tried to analyse critically what might have hindered the reception of my documentation plan, which I envisioned would serve to control the growing volume of records in western Europe and in the Federal Republic of Germany. I can offer two possible explanations.

First of all, archivists in the Federal Republic of Germany apparently do not yet regard increasing record quantity as so great a problem as it seemed to me at the time. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, communication theorists were heralding the dawn of the “information age” in their lectures and articles, and prophesying that archivists would drown in the ensuing flood of documentation. This explanation occurred to me when I compared the constitution of the German Democratic Republic, where my proposals had been pursued, with that of the Federal Republic of Germany, where they had been ignored. In the German Democratic Republic, the totalitarian, centralized state system channelled every record, regardless of whether it originated in government, in commercial enterprises, in cultural or other institutions, into the so-called “State Archival Fonds.” Archivists at the state archives therefore took the full force of the information flood. By contrast, in the Federal Republic of Germany, which is strictly

federal in structure, the problem of dealing with the acquisition of records is apparently divided up among many archives. As a result, archivists remained less conscious of the threat posed by the increasing volume of information, because the area of responsibility of each archives was relatively small and manageable. Every autonomous state or municipal archives continued to alleviate its space problems in some practical way, without worrying particularly about the question of appraisal. Besides, they did not take into account the records of the economy or other institutions in society, since most of these had their own archives.

There may be a second explanation. In March 1991, I asked myself whether the plan I had conceived in 1972 had not been too complicated. In response to the politically and ideologically charged atmosphere of the early 1970s, I may have relied too heavily on philosophical, theoretical and social categories. I would therefore suspect that this documentation plan was too theoretical and not practical enough to be usable. My suspicion was strengthened by reading a 1990 paper by Jane Turner, entitled "The Ideology of Appraisal and the Principle of Value: An Analysis of Documentation Plans and Strategies." In this paper, Turner revealed that certain parts of my documentation plan had not been completely explained, and that other parts remained vulnerable to misunderstanding.

I would like to propose a modified appraisal methodology, based on my deliberations at the March 1991 conference, as well as on my ten years' experience of appraisal practice in the German Federal Archives, which began systematically only in 1979, thirty years after the foundation of the Federal Republic. At the very beginning, I should place (as before) the documentation plan. This would no longer be a firmly sketched plan containing a kind of grid of the contemporary historical scene, but more a chronicle consisting of important dates from the period in which the records originated. This contemporary chronicle would serve the purpose of refreshing the memory of older archivists, and of permitting younger archivists, who did not directly experience the time in which the records were created, to be conversant with the events. The chronicle would alert archivists to important and essential events of the time in which the records originated — what was debated, what was controversial, what provoked society, and what moved it. In this respect, I continue to adhere staunchly to my earlier position: archivists have no other choice than to conduct their appraisal according to the emphasis and weight placed on events of the time by contemporaries. Only in this way can they free themselves from the social values of their own time, to which they are unconsciously subject. The contemporary chronicle should be recorded as a working document for archivists, and later printed in the finding aids as an account of how the documentary heritage was formed.

The next step in the preparation for archival appraisal must be an analysis of the administrative structure of the records creator at the time in which the records to be appraised were created, providing an administrative history of the individual record-creating functions. This administrative history should be reviewed and revised regularly and often. In the Federal Republic of Germany, at least, jurisdictions change every time a new government is formed, and areas of responsibility and corresponding functions are moved from one department to another. Nevertheless, archivists require a useful analysis of record-creating functions to help them connect the documentary needs identified in the contemporary chronicle with the records themselves. This means —

and its import was apparently not made clear enough in 1972 — that the process of appraisal entails the immediate transition from the content of the historical events, of subject matter, to provenance and its aspects. Archival appraisal, as a practical method, can only be completed according to and in the context of the provenance of records. If this does not happen, archival appraisal inevitably risks becoming unstructured and amorphous. Records may become divorced from the context of their creation, and the result will be a useless collection of sources, as Turner demonstrated in her paper using Helen Samuels's example of the moonshot. Subject-related documents, tied to specific events, answer only the particular research questions for which they were collected. They hardly have anything to offer to other researchers, who might require material while examining other topics. And, of course, the formulations of historical questions are subject to constant change. This is why provenance must remain the immutable foundation of the appraisal process. The analysis of administrative jurisdictions should also be recorded in writing, and later added to the documentation record. For it is the task of archivists, in advising researchers, to direct their subject-based enquiries towards administrative jurisdictions, in order to determine which fonds holds the desired source material.

After considering, in preparation for appraisal, the questions “what should I document?” (in the contemporary chronicle) and “where do I find applicable records?” (in the analysis of the administrative structure), the content of the registries must be investigated next. In the German Federal Archives, this is done by establishing standard appraisal schedules. On the ministerial level, these may alleviate the necessity for some appraisal decisions. For example, in the Ministry of Research a number of departments are active in the financial support of research projects. Which researcher was supported by how much money can be gleaned from the Ministry's annual reports, thereby rendering appraisal for this registry unnecessary.

Since the *Federal Archives Act* was passed in 1988, appraisal schedules have been developed especially for the second level of federal administration, that of the approximately 150 subsidiary agencies belonging to the ministries. To this end, archivists at the Federal Archives analyse the function of these agencies and compare them with those of the ministries, in an effort to establish which subsidiary agencies are creating important documentation not already duplicated in the ministries. Only those groups of records which have been identified in the appraisal schedules are to be transferred to the Federal Archives for appraisal.

At this stage of the process, registries consisting of masses of case files, arranged alphabetically, are dealt with — for example, the records of the federal office administering insurance and health-care benefits for public service employees. If I may extract a suitable sample here — all of the records beginning with “La,” for example, which I select for every five years — I have already lightened the appraisal load considerably.

Only after these three preparatory steps are completed can archivists in the Federal Archives begin the actual appraisal procedure. Being better oriented to the contemporary chronicle, I might test the documentary and evidential effectiveness, as future historical source, of individual records within the designated fonds. In the Federal Archives, the following method has been developed: for each volume, and always in the context of the records' provenance, the archivist judges whether the files



document activities for which the agency creating the files held primary responsibility. This follows the well-established principle that the most substantive information occurs within the files of the responsible agency. Consequently, such a series of files is always considered worthy of archival preservation. Furthermore, this volume often reveals whether there are other agencies which, by virtue of their mandate, contributed to these responsibilities in such a way that its records might provide an important complement to the records of the responsible agency. All other files produced by other agencies that may also have cooperated in discharging the same functions, but less actively, are then destroyed. Experience has shown that, through this procedure, about 60 per cent of all government documents originated by the ministries are rejected. Another 25 per cent, for which we do not yet have the desired means of reduction, should be rejected according to the standards of the contemporary chronicle, using historical criteria. This last stage in the appraisal process is not yet being implemented in the Federal Archives, however, for reasons relating to German reunification which are too extensive to be dealt with here.

The formal methods which I have described in the framework of current appraisal practice are, in my opinion, indispensable tools for archivists attempting to manage the documentary heritage. But such methods would remain empty, like concepts without perspective, if we did not fill them with our ideas of what we consider important in the content of the record. Considerations of importance occur spontaneously and unconsciously in accordance with the mindset of the society and the times in which we live. I had a vivid illustration of this at the March conference in Berlin,<sup>12</sup> to which I have already so often referred. In one of the discussions, an archivist from Dresden, formerly in the German Democratic Republic, reported that, in the one-and-a-half years after the collapse of the communist régime, she had noticed a change in the values she used to appraise records. Many of the things she had earlier considered important when living under communism, she now, living in a democracy, no longer considered important, and vice versa. This example serves to illustrate once again how human beings, in their commonly held values, are products of their society. Through reflection they can achieve a certain distance from it, but total separation is impossible. That is why, in appraising records, archivists need to orient themselves to the values of the records' contemporaries, for whose sake the records were created.

### Notes

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1 Hans Booms, "Society and the Formation of a Documentary Heritage: Issues in the Appraisal of Archival Sources" *Archivaria* 24 (Summer 1987), pp. 69-107.

2 Theodore Schellenberg, *The Appraisal of Modern Public Records* (Washington, 1956), pp. 233-278.

3 Booms, "Society and the Formation of a Documentary Heritage," p. 71.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 96.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 100.

7 *Archivmitteilungen* 3/91, p. 112.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 127.

9 *Aus der Arbeit der Archive. Beiträge zum Archivwesen, zur Quellenkunde und zur Geschichte; Festschrift für Hans Booms*, hrsg. von Friedrich P. Kahlenberg (Boppard am Rhein, 1989), pp. 1-988.

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 153-161.

11 *Archivmitteilungen* 3/91, pp. 101-130.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 101-130.