

# *Records Acquisition Strategy and its Theoretical Foundation: The Case for a Concept of Archival Hermeneutics*

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In what has recently been described as the “post-custodial era” of modern archivy, new operational tactics are being devised by archivists and archival institutions to locate, identify, and preserve the historical past.<sup>1</sup> One of the most promising of these schemes proposes to concentrate on the adaptation and expansion of traditional archival knowledge to encourage a more conceptual approach to records appraisal and selection, the primary objective being gradually to evolve a practical intellectual strategy for the archival acquisition of textual documents and other media of information.<sup>2</sup> This new emphasis on the tactic of “records acquisition strategy,” however, remains fraught with problems of methodology and analytic interpretation, several of which, no doubt, existed long before the emergence of acquisition strategy as a nascent archival theory, but which, taken together, characterize it. These include the establishment of principles of choice; the definition of the level and the specification of the form of records analysis; the identification and delimitation of the structures, functions, processes, continuities, forces and events that articulate archival material; and the determination of the systemic, causal, analogic or discursive relations that make it possible to identify a homogeneity of records.

From a purely pragmatic perspective, the emergence of records acquisition strategy as a template for documentary appraisal has generally coincided with the recent diminution of resources at the disposal of archives, and the rapid growth and multiformity of records qualifying for acquisition and permanent preservation. Administrative, storage and service costs have increased without a commensurate augmentation of custodial funds; institutional staff complements have remained static or declined, while the physical extent of the records targetted by indigeneous acquisition mandates has expanded almost beyond measure. Coupled with the increasing complexity of contemporary systems and media of information, which require a greater degree of professional analysis and technical expertise (and hence resource expenditure), many archival institutions find themselves confronted with difficult intellectual choices.<sup>3</sup> In which records should their dwindling resources be invested? If the archival “harvest” is to be purposely limited, which records have the greatest or most relevant archival-historical value?

In the view of some archival administrators, especially those directly responsible for managing an operational budget, the application of an acquisitions strategy to the process of records appraisal is considered to be something of a panacea for their financial woes, and a potential salve for the programmatic wounds likely to be inflicted by economic retrenchment. Not only does it promise a reduction in the number of records collected through a more strenuous concentration and determination of documentary value, and a reduction in the amount of time expended on records appraisal through the assumption of a more rigorous analytic methodology, but it purports to protect the integrity of the archival record through recourse to a more rational and comprehensive selection process.

Unfortunately, the equation of acquisition strategy with the forces of operational economy is but one of several convenient diversions which tend to obscure the general state of archival affairs. Even if the financial restrictions were lifted in some future and perfect archival world, it is doubtful whether the archival record of our past would be any better informed than it is now. This assumes that it is simply a lack of funding that prevents us from properly carrying out our appointed acquisition tasks; that we have in our possession a corpus of archival knowledge adequate to appraise and acquire records with clarity of purpose and in an intellectually valid manner; that we have in waiting a coordinated plan to facilitate the archival selection of our historically significant records. In fact, many of the leading archival institutions (in Canada, at least) would be bound to admit that their acquisition experience has not always proven to be entirely satisfactory; that they most often engage in the assessment and selection of records accumulated either customarily or fortuitously through an acquisition "programme" loosely based on a combination of intuition, familiarity, *ad hoc* procedures and arrangements, and an ill-defined and largely uncoordinated variety of subject, theme, provenance, and media-guided initiatives or orientations. Moreover, despite its discursive currency in archival circles, the theoretical foundation for records acquisition strategy remains conceptually amorphous. It is a hypothesis for records analysis which promises to carve out contours or fields of acquisition in the landscape of historical documentation, but as yet it lacks the quality of dialectical substance or methodological rigour required to sustain it as a legitimate and coherent mode of records appraisal.

Certainly, the overwhelming impulse is to accept some version of records acquisition strategy as an immediate administrative-programmatic cure for several critical practical-financial ills; however, without a substantial degree of intellectual investment in the conceptual formula of the strategy, it is doubtful whether we shall witness anything more than a professional diagnosis and disputation of the practical problems at hand. Out of financial necessity, we must now learn to balance our natural motivation to preserve all of the past against the contingencies of operational resource restrictions. But more importantly, we must also recognize the function and role of an archives as a site of historical agency, or signification, or interpretive decipherment. Ultimately, we must accept our professional responsibility to enfranchise the archaeology of our documentary heritage with a logical and deductive method of records acquisition capable of locating, identifying, disentangling, selecting, and preserving it. We must learn how to transform what amounts to archival custom and usage into a coherent and meaningful discourse on the discipline of records appraisal.

The purpose of this essay is to plot a theoretical course for records appraisal in the wake of the strategic impulse and its somewhat troubled waters. Part of what follows reflects an interpretation of the ideas currently circulating at the National Archives of Canada, where I work as a government records archivist, and where I have lately been fortunate to participate in the debate and discussion surrounding the constitution of a corporate acquisition strategy.<sup>4</sup> To my knowledge, the National Archives of Canada is the only archival institution in North America, or anywhere else for that matter, actually to grapple with the notion of records acquisition strategy and its potential application to documentary appraisal.

I say this in full awareness of the efforts of our colleagues in the United States to formulate a "documentation strategy" for the selection of archival records, principally the work of Helen Samuels, Richard Cox, Larry Jackman, Joan Warnow-Blewett *et al.*<sup>5</sup> From the outset, therefore, let us be clear about the meaning of our terminology in reference to the word "strategy" and its most notable archival-etymological adaptations. Having recently experienced the elevation of the notion of "strategy," or rather "documentation strategy," to the status of archival "buzz-word" during a national conference of professional archivists, it is apparent that there is some residual confusion concerning the conceptual thrust of the "documentation strategy" and "records acquisition strategy" initiatives.<sup>6</sup> This is not altogether surprising. The archival literature on "documentation strategy" is comparatively extensive and compelling, and its theoretical tenets and propositions possess a certain degree of maturity, while the very notion of "records acquisition strategy" has only recently gained support and acceptance in one isolated instance. There are, too, several intellectual linkages between the strategies which manifestly contribute to the suffusion of one with the other. Nevertheless, the two approaches are diametrically opposed in one essential and fundamental respect. Documentation strategy suggests a research agenda to focus the identification and assignment of records to archival repositories or fonds based either on a subject-thematic categorization of the social *communitas*, or on a functional analysis of institutions-administrations. By contrast, records acquisition strategy assumes the existence of a pre-defined, clearly delineated information universe or jurisdiction, and proposes a research agenda to facilitate the appraisal of its constituent documentation based on strains of archival-historical value in relation and reference to provenance. The former concentrates on a selection process determined by the capacity of records to recall or reflect certain pre-ordained subjective categories and qualities; the latter concentrates on an objective determination of archival value emerging from an analysis of records creators and indigeneous patterns of records organization and administration.

However subtle these differences may initially appear, they in fact prescribe rather different solutions to the practical and intellectual problems of records appraisal outlined above. Yet it is not my intention here to offer comparisons between the two approaches. This would serve no useful purpose whatever, since, unlike its American counterpart, the principles fundamental to a records acquisition strategy have not yet achieved anything like true consensual codification. Rather, what I hope to outline and convey is a potential theoretical foundation for an archival appraisal strategy based on an assessment of records creators and coincidental forms of records-keeping activity. Nevertheless, in this particular formula are inevitably planted the seeds of a methodological opposition to "documentation strategy."

I have only one caveat to impose upon the discussion: I shall not attempt to address the problem of records acquisition strategy in relation to records created by non-government agencies. It is my personal opinion that private sector records, at least in the context of the Canadian experience, are not logically related to provenance-based value appraisal, but are more susceptible to the sort of analysis elaborated in the documentation strategy initiatives proposed by Samuels and Cox. In other words, I am suggesting that there are two courses of evaluative appraisal diagnosis which ought to be employed in the ordinary process of archival selection, depending upon the creative source or inspiration of the records, the one either complementing or supplementing the other.<sup>7</sup> I hope that the reasons for this methodological separation will become evident as the discussion unfolds.

Let me begin with a statement of first principles. It is now widely accepted that conventional methods of appraisal and selection are no longer sufficient to cope with the physical extent and intellectual content of the records presently under archival consideration, and that they will be wholly inadequate for the purposes and requirements of most archival mandates in what promises to be a future age of superabundant documentation.<sup>8</sup> In addition to the issue of records mass/volume, however, the changing nature and character of documentary resources and their custodial artifacts, principally apparent in the interactive environment of electronic communication, is gradually moving the archival profession from a physical and content-derived framework of records evaluation to a conceptual and contextual methodology of information analysis. Furthermore, there has lately emerged a growing interpretive consensus among archivists that "complexity" is a condition endemic to the configuration and meaning of society, and hence to the archaeology of its historical documentation.<sup>9</sup> As records analysts and appraisers, archivists now generally accept that there are many encodations, linkages, references, and other cross-structural and functional "pollinations" which contribute to the documentary heritage of contemporary society and the societies of our predecessors.

Public records archivists have been especially influenced by new paradigms of bureaucratic organization which seek to decode the meaning of its techno-administrative complex. Consider the writings of David Bearman, whose ruminations on the subjects of provenance and archival information retrieval have implicitly proposed radical alterations to our appraisal methodology for government records.<sup>10</sup> It is quite clear that certain analytic limitations have been imposed upon the appraisal and selection of government records by a reflexive and perhaps unwitting reliance on a purely structural interpretation of modern bureaucratic organization, which, in archival terms, translates as the systematic assessment of records by provenance. Almost inevitably, the pervasiveness of classical organizational theory (Weber) has enshrined the view that the typical bureaucracy is autonomous and sovereign. At the highest levels, bureaucratic action and the structures it produces are assumed to be the result of internally formulated policy. At the level of implementation (the working level), it is similarly assumed that bureaucratic action is the product of a one-dimensional, hierarchical relationship, i.e., what is decided at the higher level is implemented at the next lower level. In Canada, however, even the most cursory examination of our federal bureaucracy will show that this simple vertical relationship belies a reality that is far more complex. Set down any federal organization chart, and one is confronted by dotted lines, influence arrows and circles, two-way authority links and other shorthand which

represent a host of non-hierarchical relationships. In short, what information scientists commonly refer to as “mono-hierarchy,” the concept of a chain-of-command, is a poor representation of the federal bureaucracy, even in its most historically primitive version. It formalizes, shapes and gives coherence to a complex reality at the expense of explaining its complexity; it simply fails to capture all the informal relationships within a bureaucratic organization which together explain its collective mission, structure, and activity.<sup>11</sup>

Consider also the weaknesses of a purely structural-‘provenancial’ approach to the appraisal of records created within the private sector of society. Structuralist theory encourages the notion of “constraint,” the categorization or classification of society by the subjective properties of systems embedded in normative vocabulary, rules, procedures, and resources, time and space (language, kinship, culture, politics, religion, etc.): it fixes on the notion of “cultural totalities,” or world-views, or ideal types. In many instances, we have tacitly integrated this theory of social analysis into our records selection methodology through a concentration on the continuity of theme or subject as the principal point of reference in the appraisal of private records, notwithstanding the special considerations assigned to the selection process by the context of their physical media. We tend to appraise aggregates of private records in isolation from one another, by virtue of their thematic or subjective continuity, rather than within the full context of social integration, function, and process. Hence the polity, with its elected representatives and appointed officials, is separated in some part from socio-economic issues and procedures; artistic expression, with its objects and performers, is separated in some part from its cultural roots or foundation in the curricula of education. By exploring the representation, phenomena, and meaning of the social-communal environment disposed through the media of records rather than documenting specific instances of its manifest activity and disclosure; by placing the recorded traces of individuals, groups, continuities, events, and forces in the interactive context of their creative formulation, we are more likely to capture the documentary essence and elemental consciousness of our society and its historical connections.

The inauguration of a records acquisition strategy is not necessarily designed to relegate these trusted appraisal and selection guidelines to methodological obscurity. Instead, it calls for a fundamental re-examination of the principles upon which we base our appraisal decisions by offering an alternative or complementary framework of records analysis, in effect, a categorical expansion of the meaning of provenance to accommodate new selection criteria. Precisely what this theoretical expansion ought to include has been the subject of very considerable debate and discussion. Inevitably, it calls for a clear understanding of the meaning of “strategy” within the archival context of its interpretation. What do we actually mean by a “records acquisition strategy”?

The word “strategy” has many connotations, notable among which is the design of a “plan of attack,” or the “tactical management of a campaign” in order to defeat an “enemy.” Extending the analogy, I want to suggest that the true enemy of any archives is the accumulation of documentary “rubbish,” either as the result of a poorly conceived and unbridled records acquisition programme, or as a consequence of various afflictions and manifestations of operational or intellectual paralysis. I think it safe to say that both the unguided, unreasoned, haphazard accumulation of documentation, and the stockpiling of records with marginal or no historical value whatsoever, must cease

forthwith, lest we become buried under an avalanche of disordered, irrelevant information, or offer to succeeding generations a corpus of records incidental or peripheral to the contemporary-historical discourse of our society.

In the version currently offered by the National Archives of Canada, records acquisition strategy endeavours to accomplish this mission for government records in three ways. First, it seeks to identify primary locations and generic sources (fonds) of potentially significant archival records within fields of documentation destined for disposal by virtue of established collecting mandates. We call this the “setting of acquisition targets.” Secondly, it prescribes that these “acquisition targets” be placed into an intellectual order of collecting priority, and furthermore, that each of these targets be subsequently reduced to its internal administrative components in order to determine a progressive reading and ranking of their potential archival-historical value at the sous-fonds or “series” level — what we call the development of a “records disposition plan.”<sup>12</sup> Let there be no misunderstanding as to the meaning or intention of these tactics. In this theoretical interpretation, acquisition strategy is synonymous with macro-appraisal. It is an appraisal strategy for records conducted at the collective rather than at the item level, at the tier of the records creator, rather than at the syntactic stratum of records substance. In other words, it is a records appraisal intellectually conducted from the “top-down” rather than the “bottom-up.” It emphasizes the archival value of a site or location or environment of records creation, as opposed to the archival value of the records themselves; it assigns primacy of importance to the evidential context in which records are created, rather than to the value of the information which the documents contain.

There can be no doubt that this notion of acquisition strategy calls for a very different analytic treatment of government records. Not only does it prescribe a holistic approach to the appraisal of government documents, but its constituent selection principles are actually based on a nascent form of “archival hermeneutics,” that is, on a particular application to the physical and intellectual environment in which public records are created and encoded, of a philosophy of understanding and historical representation principally derived from the presumptive knowledge of and engagement with context. In the sense of its elementary definition, “hermeneutics” means the theory of interpretation. Scholars who have written in the hermeneutic tradition would argue that in order to understand human behaviour, we have to interpret its meaning. Rather than seeing human conduct as governed by laws, or as caused, like events in nature, we have to grasp the intentions and reasons which people have for their activity; we have to understand the foundational roots of human behaviour and their relation to the nature of the social institutions in which this behaviour is implicated and formulated. In other words, to comprehend fully the dimensions of human experience, the interactive context of human affairs assumes a greater degree of importance as a source of historical knowledge than an empirically-based analysis and scientific observation of natural events. Potentially translated to the field of archival practice, this determines a course of records appraisal designed to bring out alternative features of government texts which are commonly passed over by epistemological theoretical assumptions underlying traditional archival knowledge. In essence, it contrives to peel away the subjective-informational value of documents to concentrate on the objective-evidential qualities implicit in the context of their creation; it endeavours to test the archival-historical value of records inherent in their production, composition, formation, and organization

against the capacity of their information content to yield such value. In order to place this appraisal strategy for government records within a setting of contemporary historical methodology, the theory advocates a form of “deconstruction” by reducing the universe of government information to the sources of its primary signification, its administrative ethos or network of bureaucratic sub-components, so as to establish tiers of archival-historical value based on the appraisal of bureaucratic context(s) and records creators. This is intended both to facilitate the location and identification of sources and species of documentary value, and to eliminate as far as possible the appraisal of records of comparatively lesser or irrelative or inconsequential value within the meaning and interpretation of an acquisitions mandate.

Finally, the entire scheme is based on a fundamental shift in our appreciation of the function and role of an archives: from its present status merely as a repository or warehouse or receptacle for “disposed” documents, to an operational site of historical agency and interpretive decipherment founded on the critical acts of appraisal and preservation. At the National Archives of Canada, acquisition strategy prescribes and promotes an active appraisal and acquisition agenda, rather than a course of passive records reception and selection. It is also projected that this novel interpretation of its records acquisition mandate, conceived within the framework and countenanced by the specifications of the new *National Archives Act*, will have far-reaching consequences for its clientele and the mechanism of government records disposition. Not only is the purpose of National Archives acquisition strategy to identify historical records within the total corpus of government information, but is it also designed both practically and intellectually to remove from the hands of records creators and records managers the *de facto* responsibility for their historical value designation, and place it firmly under the control and supervision of archivists.

To be sure, the tactics of acquisition strategy outlined above are radically different from the traditional methods of records appraisal which we have commonly employed in the past. They also raise a host of problems upon the resolution of which ultimately depends the potential success of a “strategic” records acquisition programme. Perhaps the most pressing issue for public records archivists concerns the meaning and construction of archival fonds (or records creators), and our ability to appraise fonds rather than their constituent parts. The values and criteria which archivists commonly call upon to guide their selection of records within individual fonds or sous-fonds (series) do not apply necessarily to the appraisal of entire fonds of records within bureaucratic superstructures or administrative-institutional accumulations. In other words, what criteria should be considered to determine the relative archival value of records creators? For example, in assessing the archival significance of the departments, agencies, boards, offices, and commissions which comprise the Canadian federal bureaucracy, how does one legitimately suggest that the mandate or jurisdiction or responsibilities of the Department of Transport are either historically or intrinsically more significant than those of the National Transportation Agency, or the Canadian Hydrographic Service, or the Transportation Safety Board, or the St. Lawrence Seaway Authority? How does one rank these bureaucratic configurations in an order of archival priority? The corollary to this question may be even more important. Who are the records creators? What are the physical and intellectual boundaries of their administrative provenance? At the National Archives of Canada, some would argue that we have already been furnished with an inventory of potential archival fonds or records

creators for government records through legislative and policy requirements; be that as it may, it offers no obvious solution to the question of their priority ranking. We know what the "acquisition targets" are at the broadest scope; we do not know how to assess their relative archival value. Nor do we yet fully understand the true operational dimensions of the interactive records-creating environment communally engaged by government records creators at the primary (macro) level of federal portfolio or jurisdiction, or the administrative-institutional complexity internal to individual records creators at the secondary level of sous-fonds or documentary series, which may also have a bearing on the assessment of their archival significance and priority ranking. Indeed, should we even accept the judgement of government on the organization and merits of its own functional structure?

Reflecting on my own experience with government records, and the perceptions and comments of my colleagues, I do not believe that we can accept the specified targets without some qualification. There are several reasons for this. Over the years, archivists have relied heavily on the ethos of administrative structure, or provenance, to identify the potential caches of historically significant government records. Find the primary administrative sources, and one automatically has the pure nectar of historical insight, at least so runs the conventional wisdom. Yet we know intuitively that this is not the case. Here is the environment of government policy and decision-making, not necessarily the location of its operational application, and certainly not the site of its interaction with society at large. The structure of government organization is not only artificial from the perspective of its own teleology, but it often has little empirical meaning to the configuration and distribution of its information through the media of records.

One of the obvious alternatives to administrative structure is administrative function. In Canada, our federal government bureaucracy is actually composed of sites and echelons of policy and programme delivery. It constitutes a network of functions and processes which transacts national business on various natural-physical, political, economic, cultural, communal, and personal scales. In effect, it is a grid for administrative activity which transcends the limitations of its own structural components. Rarely, if ever, is it the case that a federal programme or project falls within the province of a single department or agency. Through the various conventions of intra-bureaucratic committees, by virtue of their operational mandate or the requirements of public accountability, or simply in reference to their reporting arrangements within the administrative structure, several departments are usually implicated in any federal undertaking, each of them in turn documenting the nature of their resource commitment or functional involvement in the decision-making process.

From the perspective of archival appraisal, the records of these functional transactions most often reside in the documentary environment of their direct application, the point at which policy interacts with the civil constituency. Archivists often refer generically to these transactions as "case files," meaning either files of "particular instance" or single transaction, or files of "continuing events," but we might also legitimately include in this functional category "subject" or "registry" files, many of which are created strictly for transactional or programme delivery purposes, exhibit characteristics and tendencies similar to "case files," and frequently possess similar archival value. Yet we also know that these files or transactions exist in the hundreds of thousands — in paper or electronic form, or both — and that many of them often yield



homogeneous evidential information. For this among other reasons, the archival community has lately engaged in studious attempts to develop conceptual methodology and appraisal standards to deal with case files, in the acknowledgement that they contain in some instances significant historical documentation, but largely represent an unmanageable information “glut” in the archival market.<sup>13</sup> As far as “subject” or “registry” files are concerned, nothing comparable to the proposed case file resolution has yet been attempted; we continue to deal with subject files through the labour-intensive procedure of file-by-file or block-by-block selection, or else we acquire subject file or registry corpora in their entirety as systemic continuities.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the purely functional approach to government records appraisal offers small consolation to the proposition and tenets of acquisition strategy; it constitutes a slippery slope towards the eventual denial of the archival selection process. How, then, do we reconcile the administrative structure of government policy with the administrative site (alternative structure or para-structure) of its functional application?

For the moment, let us suppose that the strategic issue of a macro-appraisal for government records essentially resides in the harmonization of a structural and functional approach to the archival-historical interpretation of its documentation; what the social analyst Anthony Giddens, in his paradigm for communal organization, has called the theory of “structuration” — the notion that the configuration and meaning of society is most completely ascertained through a concentration on the interactive process between social structures and social functions, on the functionality or agency of structure. This theory offers in the place of social structure traditionally conceived as recursively organized sets of rules and resources without time and space, and social function traditionally conceived as the situated activities of agents reproduced across time and space, the idea or modality of “intersection” (structuration), the point at which social systems, grounded in the knowledgeable activities (functions) of situated actors who draw upon rules and resources (structures) in the diversity of action contexts, are produced and reproduced in interaction. Hence, according to Giddens, structure essentially represents a duality; the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize. Structure is not external to individuals (agents); as memory traces, or as instantiated social practices, it is internal to their functional activities.<sup>15</sup> What then is the locus of this convergence for government bureaucracy? And how do we define it in archival terms? Does this point of intersection adequately fulfill the meaning and construction of an archival fonds? Moreover, how do the characteristics and parameters of this interactive environment of bureaucratic processes alter over time? I believe that these are the crucial theoretical questions waiting to be addressed by any archival strategy aimed at a macro-appraisal of government documentation.

There are some interesting answers currently available. Nearly twenty years ago, Hans Booms wrote a brilliant article on the conceptual formulation and archival analysis of documentary heritage, concentrating on the empirical realm of social process, the notion of contemporary valuation, and the reading of records as crafted and explanatory glosses on the *mentalité* of social environment, as the principal components of an archival prototype or model for records appraisal and selection. According to Booms, the appraisal of records and the determination of their archival value is irrevocably linked to a concept of social theory which entertains a combination of traditional epistemology with the hermeneutic methodology of documentary criticism,

in order to locate a distilled measure of socio-historical discourse and archival interpretation.<sup>16</sup> Taking the notion of a discursive distillation of society a step further, Siegfried Büttner has introduced the notion and metaphor of image as the principal locus for the production of social understanding and meaning. Büttner suggests that an image distillation of interactive social dynamics will inevitably identify an elemental historical discourse supported by homogeneities of potentially significant archival records. More recently, Terry Cook has produced several seminal papers on this subject, concentrating primarily on the modality of image as expressed through the interface between the state and its civil constituency. Cook offers the operational site of bureaucratic process and social impress, bounded by the political and administrative formations of structure and function, as the most legitimate analytical threshold for the macro-appraisal of government records. In a conceptual formula reminiscent of Giddens's theory of structuration, he suggests an appraisal model which identifies points of "intersection" between structure and function as the critical reflective loci of society's central images (Büttner). Consequently, the fonds produced by or at these points of image intersection assume a significant degree of importance in the strategic scheme of macro-appraisal, since they are most relevant to the archaeological-documentary heritage of contemporary society (Booms), and most likely to yield series of potentially valuable records.<sup>17</sup>

What these archivists are proposing is an intellectual focus for modelled or strategic records acquisition based on the application of social theory to the environment of archives and the practice of archival appraisal. They attempt not to imprint a particular understanding on the meaning of social organization through a particular brand of records appraisal, but rather seek to identify the records environment in which social meaning is composed and produced. In effect, the paradigm of the distilled image of socio-bureaucratic discourse is the point at which the macro-appraisal of government records ought to begin. Without referring explicitly to its nascent philosophical tenets, these archivists actually subscribe to a theory of records appraisal approaching a concept of "archival hermeneutics."

It is likely apparent that I have been mixing the language and precepts of social theory and literary analysis, perhaps in a somewhat cavalier fashion; for example, my references to the theory of deconstruction and the hermeneutic interpretation of texts in relation to structural or systemic loci of records creation. Yet, from an archival-historical perspective, the two are not necessarily incompatible, and frequently find synthetic treatment in the *oeuvres* and *episteme* of the "grand theorists."<sup>18</sup> Consider their intellectual contingencies and connections as illuminated by Michel Foucault in his consummate study of historical methodology and philosophy, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*: "When one speaks of a system of formation, one does not only mean the juxtaposition, coexistence, or interaction of heterogeneous elements (institutions, techniques, social groups, perceptual organizations), but also the relation that is established between them — and in a well-defined form — by discursive practice."<sup>19</sup> Just as formations of system (or structures) produce and qualify statements of origin, foundation, operation, and axiom, so do discursive formations, or homogeneities of texts (or records), through their vocabulary, syntax, rhetoric and physical organization, articulate and transcribe the construction, transformations, mutations, and functions-processes of systems. Hence, in Foucault's opinion, "discourse and system produce each other."<sup>20</sup> Behind any completed system, organization or structure, is an immense

density of functional or processive relations that is coincidentally transcribed into texts; a narrative discourse of knowledge, language, assumptions, rules, and principles which specify and characterize system-structure. To translate this hypothesis into archival terminology, records creators are simultaneously the product of structural or systemic evolutionary development, and of a modality of discursive representation embodied in the narrative texts of their recorded dialogue.

What I mean to advance here is the proposal that an acquisition strategy for Canadian government records, or any bureaucracy for that matter, should embrace something of the conceptual imprint of Foucault's interpretive synthesis. It ought to begin with an analytic model of social theory, in this case, a paradigm which focuses attention on the interrelations among institutional-administrative structures, functions, and processes; and on a conception of structure which incorporates a theory of action (Giddens). At the same time, I am suggesting that the identification, evaluation, interpretation, and description of this interactive environment also resides in a reading of its records as bureaucratic discourse. In addition to the perception and knowledge of the bureaucratic environment predisposed by an analytic cognition of systemic and structural formations, our understanding of the configuration of government and its functional-processive activity is located and explained by certain diacritical markers contained within its records. Our consciousness of bureaucratic structure, function, and process, the meaning and value we place upon and ascribe to bureaucratic activity within its operational setting, is coincidentally rooted in its own account of itself, in its narrative discourse, in its texts.

This two-tiered methodology of bureaucratic analysis is very similar to, but not exactly the same as the course that the National Archives of Canada currently means to follow. Here the avowed intention is to eliminate as far as possible the appraisal or consideration of records at first instance; to settle upon acquisition "targets" solely by virtue of the potential archival significance of records creators in reference and relation to their functional or societal interactions. Personally, I have no objection to the designation of particular records creators or fonds as acquisition targets based on a priority ranking of value, nor do I have any difficulty with the ranking of the "targets" as it is now constituted, which concentrates attention on federal departments and agencies of large physical size and complexity, functionally having either a central coordinating or preeminent role within the bureaucratic process, and whose echelons of programme delivery have a significant impact on the civil constituency.<sup>21</sup> This is a logical starting-point, practically consistent with the present status of our analytic knowledge of the federal government, and purely relevant to the purpose of macro-appraisal, which seeks to identify records-creating environments likely to produce records of archival value. I merely question whether the propositions of the current priority-ranking formula have the capacity to sustain an appraisal strategy beyond the first analytic assay. I fear that any appraisal decisions taken subsequent to the initial acquisition contacts will satisfy the categorical requirements of methodology and process, but forsake any future theoretical development and direction.

If we are truly to implement a strategy of archival selection based on an appraisal of records creators, it is unlikely that such a strategy can enjoy any sustained success without some reflection on the documentary ingredient, without a consideration of the records themselves. I do not mean here an assessment of records predicated on

traditional appraisal categories of archival significance — whether records possess informational, evidential, fiscal, intrinsic value, etc. — but rather on a critical reading of records within their bureaucratic context. If we are actually to subscribe to a social theory of bureaucratic analysis following Giddens's paradigm of structuration, or a reasonable facsimile thereof (Booms, Büttner, Cook), as I think we must, then it is imperative that we develop a theoretical formula to sustain and support its archival application beyond the practical "first step." I would suggest that this formula ought to devote some of its attention to a syntactic examination and reading of records as narrative texts; to the meaning and understanding implicit in the formation, production, structure, and rhetoric of records.

There are several reasons to retain textual analysis as a key ingredient in any macro-appraisal formula destined to be applied to government information sources. In the first place, at least in the context of the Canadian federal bureaucracy, we cannot yet be sure of the true identity of the records creators. Despite the so-called "advantage" of a legislated inventory of acquisition targets, which qualifies certain departments and agencies as candidates for archival selection, there are any number of obvious cases where the template fails to reflect the actual process of government and its records-creating environments. This inventory is manifestly rooted in the most primitive form of "structuralism," satisfactory, perhaps, to its administrative advocates and sponsors, but perceptibly irrelevant to the reality of public governance. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to identify a single bureaucratic function or process which does not involve the operational input of two or more departments, and coincidentally, a corpus of records indigeneous to each agency containing analogous or related information. If it is our strategic intention to collect for posterity the documentation relevant to bureaucratic processes and functions both in reference to their interactive relationships and their physical-intellectual constituency within structural or systemic confines, who then are the primary records creators? Where are the seminal or key archival fonds located?

One may also consider these questions in microcosm, within the confines of a single department or agency. Recently, the National Archives of Canada had occasion to acquire a most important fonds of government records belonging to the erstwhile Trade Negotiations Office. In his summary comments on this acquisition, the archivist in charge lamented the fact that the creators of the records were difficult to identify because it was not "possible to find anyone who could answer fundamental questions about the creation of these records and their organization, if any existed. The only approach that was feasible was to use internal evidence from the documents to identify the creator of the records or the individual for whom the records were created."<sup>22</sup> This is an especially telling remark, for it underscores the limitations of any records acquisition strategy which promotes beyond the preliminary-experimental stage a macro-appraisal process based solely on a social theory of structuralism: on the identification of records creators strictly in reference to the traditional meaning of archival provenance. Clearly, in order to set a records acquisition strategy logistically in motion, it is practical to rely on conventional wisdom and experience, for instance, to follow an inventory of acquisition targets entrenched by mandate and legislation. At the National Archives of Canada, it is intended that this strategic endeavour will include the opportunity for archivists to pursue detailed research on individual departments and agencies (records creators), with the principal aim of ranking within the context of their structural boundaries the internal records creators or sous-fonds in a priority order of archival

value. For example, it is anticipated that the records created in the office of a cabinet minister will necessarily have more significance than the departmental records of his/her policy transactions at the programme delivery level (case files). Having conducted the relevant appraisal research, however, it will be essential to correlate the observational findings of archivists with a view to a second round of fonds identification and priority ranking. In fact, the National Archives also anticipates that the results of its appraisal research will inevitably lead to periodically changing acquisition priorities at the archival fonds and sous-fonds levels, whether this be a matter of identifying the candidature of records creators in the macro-environmental sense of the entire structure of government bureaucracy, or internal records creators associated with individual agencies. There obviously exists the possibility that a corpus of records created by a single office within a government department will eventually outrank in archival importance the records created by an entire agency of so-called primary bureaucratic responsibility. It is simply the case that no intellectual guidelines have been set down to channel or focus the results of the appraisal research. There have been no provisions made positively to secure the aftermath of the inaugural appraisal-analyses.

With the first round of appraisal research completed, at least in some cases, I am anticipating that the archival-historical significance of the records will not generally tally with the ranking of the records creators as it is now apprehended. Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that the administrative-structural boundaries of departments or offices conventionally presented in policy manuals on government organization will cease necessarily to occupy their current preeminent status in the overall scheme of macro-appraisal. In the course of their research on records creators, what archivists are most likely to discover is a bureaucratic configuration of multiple jurisdictions, an overlapping of policies, programmes, and activities among departmental offices at the working level or operational point of implementation, and coincidentally, multiple series of interrelated records documenting particular functions and processes of government. They will observe, for example, that the Ice Climatology Research Centre of the Department of the Environment, the Navigable Waters Protection Act Program of Transport Canada, the Search and Rescue Unit of the Canadian Coast Guard, and the Marine Casualty Investigation Branch of the Transportation Safety Board, have a greater administrative and records-creating affinity with one other than with their respective departments to which they formally report. They will also observe that the procedures governing immigration to Canada require applicants to move through no less than a dozen offices in many separate departments and agencies, producing a single discernible stream of records transcending the indigeneous barriers of jurisdictional organization. Or that the "approval process" for any government decision on federally-funded capital projects (a hydro-electric installation in the Canadian North, for example) can involve upwards of a score of departments, agencies, boards, offices, and commissions, not to mention a host of privately endowed lobby and interest groups. In fact, what they are likely to discover are certain functions, or amalgams of functions (processes), conceived within the administrative confines of particular departments and agencies, yet stretching beyond the specified parameters of their operational field of responsibility to form echelons or sites of records "productivity" based on cross-structural relations and linkages. In other words, they will locate what the National Archives ostensibly intends its records acquisition strategy to identify — records

creating environments or records creators. The problem is that the “structural” (if this is the word) affinity of these “records creators” will almost inevitably bear little resemblance to the characteristics of traditional archival fonds rooted in present intellectual measures and standards of archival provenance founded on mono-hierarchical structures.

In the wake of this eventuality, there are several courses of remedial action available. In a wholesale rectification of traditional archival theory, the meaning and construction of provenance could be redefined to accommodate the notion of records creators or fonds based entirely on the primary loci of bureaucratic functions and processes; on new, para-structural sites of policy application and programme delivery both identified and delimited by interpretations of observed functional and processive phenomena related to horizontal, rather than, or in addition to, vertical affinities or structural physicalities. In this case, archival fonds would be defined exclusively by their physiological reference to specific or generic functions and processes of government, rather than by bureaucratic structures of administration rooted in allocated fields of responsibility or jurisdictional portfolios.

Despite the attractions of such a conceptual reorientation from the perspective of archival information description and retrieval, and perhaps from the comfort of the historian’s armchair, this course of action would likely pose certain insoluble problems of practical and intellectual application. Such a decision would not only render obsolete a body of generally sound, accumulated archival wisdom, but it would also require a complete rethinking of the record group concept, the very foundation of the archival organization and arrangement of government records. Moreover, in light of bureaucracy’s contemporary-historical existence in an almost constant state of administrative metamorphosis (especially in Canada), could archivists actually stay abreast of its functional or processive changes over time with a view to the identification of fonds and their documentation? How would it be possible either to acquire or to maintain intellectual control of the historical records generated by government without eventually succumbing to the lure of a subject or thematic categorization? All things considered, it is unlikely that the possible benefits of this particular re-working or “reduction in power” of archival provenance would outweigh the practical and intellectual problems of its theoretical introduction, at least in the foreseeable future.<sup>23</sup>

A far less radical and disruptive alternative, and one which also bears the promise potentially to satisfy the requirements of a macro-appraisal strategy, would be to “boost” the power of provenance. Basically, this approach would involve the expansion of the meaning of provenance to include new categories or criteria of archival value to be directly applied to the identification, assessment, and archival ranking of records creators, and perhaps, to the appraisal and selection of their constituent documentation. Of theoretical and practical necessity, the implications of such an enterprise would also involve a reflexive inversion of the ordinary procedural “mechanics” of records appraisal. These new “values” would be most logically ascertained or determined from the observation of bureaucratic phenomena and the interpretation of bureaucratic context, in reference to a corpus of accumulated knowledge on the functions and processes of government, rather than deduced and applied *post facto* in virtue of premeditated archival theory, i.e., in the manner that the archival significance of documentation is conventionally assessed in relation to certain categories of value and

their subjective connection to preselected systems or structures. In effect, I am proposing a conceptual recasting of the traditional meaning of provenance to include the identification of records creators or "environments of records creation" based on a contextual knowledge of their functional-processive activity. I am also suggesting that this knowledge is frequently imparted through messages encoded by records creators in their documentary texts. Hence, to engage successfully in an archival-priority ranking of government records creators, we must learn to read (or re-read) government records as narrative discourse on the activity of government; as evidence of its operational functions and processes.

This should not be construed to mean the continuation of the sort of item-by-item or file-by-file or block-by-block analysis which we are accustomed to employ in the ordinary course of archival selection. Nor should it be interpreted as an argument in favour of a "return to the records" in the manner recently proposed by archivists seeking to recast the methods of the traditional science of diplomatics for modern appraisal and records selection usage.<sup>24</sup> On the contrary, I am advocating a critical examination of homogeneities of texts (records) sufficient to make decisions concerning the identity of records creators (or fonds), and facilitate their ranking in an order of collecting priority. How could this possibly be accomplished without either unravelling entirely the meaning of provenance, or negating the conceptual thrust of macro-appraisal?

The answers to both of these questions may reside in the application of hermeneutic, or more exactly, quasi-hermeneutic methodology, to the appraisal of records. As indicated earlier, the philosophy of hermeneutics disposes of the interpretation of information in favour of the interpretation of the site or environment in which information is created and encoded. It concentrates on the meaning implicit in the various acts attending the formation, composition and production of documents rather than on the manifest results of documentary creativity (content); it seeks historical insight in the context internal to a document's narrative encodation rather than in the external context of interpretation, which may be subsequently layered onto its informational content in order to explain its significance. To reverse the conventional methodology of the epistemic social sciences, it advocates the "thin" rather than the "thick" description of meaning.<sup>25</sup> Hence, in its potential application to archival practice, a hermeneutic approach to records appraisal would interpose the value-interpretation of a records-creating environment over the value-interpretation of records. In a sense, it would single out and elevate the notion of evidential value to a different plane of archival application by offering the narrative discourse internal to records as "evidence" of the particular context or objective circumstances in which the records have been created. In other words, the discursive substance or 'narrativity' of texts would be analysed and appraised solely in view of establishing the identity and activity of records creators; the intellectual and physical parameters of records creators would be revealed by virtue of apprehended narrative codes embedded in texts, i.e., the diacritical marks of associative function and process which separate texts from the presystematic or prediscursive and inscribe them in terminal states of discourse (structure).<sup>26</sup> At all its levels of formation, discourse reveals messages of origin, authorship, statement, object, continuity, responsibility, authority, lineage, relation, etc. These are the clues which transform the uncertainty and essential silence of "raw" text into the meaningful discursive reserves and formations we interpret as consciousness of order or system.

The greater the weight of their impression upon the composition, shaping, production and rhetoric of the text (record), the more likely we are to approach or encounter the sources and boundaries of a record's creative inspiration (or fonds).

This is perhaps a somewhat generous interpretation of the hermeneutic intention and its potential archival application. Moreover, given the fundamental disagreements and debates among the twentieth-century *philosophes* who subscribe to hermeneutic methodology (Gadamer, Habermas, Ricoeur, *et al.*), or even distant versions thereof (Barthes, Borges, Derrida), it would be foolish to suppose that there exists a single strand or convergence of understanding. What is attractive about "hermeneutics" from an archival perspective is its apparent intellectual consistency with regard to the rejection of the subjective meaning of texts, in favour of the objective knowledge or presumption of context. This encourages an archival conception of understanding (appraisal) which concentrates priority of emphasis on the interpretation of a document's creative environment, on the meaning (and value) of records subscribed through knowledge of the records creator. What is difficult about hermeneutics from a macro records acquisition strategy perspective, however, is its more recent intellectual consistency with regard to the comprehension of context in texts, i.e., the notion that context may only be truly ascertained by a knowledge of its inscription in texts and discourse (records).<sup>27</sup>

Hermeneutic methodology and philosophy distinguish two important areas of research inquiry for archivists. By insisting on the interpretation of context as the real foundation of historical representation and explanation, it encourages archivists to locate and identify records creators amidst records; to reduce recorded information to the principal sources of its inspiration and creation, or to "deconstruct" from the organic-documentary whole the genetic texts or discourses concerning the contextual environment of their formation and production. At the same time, it also recognizes a fundamental connection between the process of contextual-narrative "deconstruction" and its texts — between the identification of records creators and their records. Context is manifestly inscribed in text and discourse; records creators are "reconstructed" from records. Hence, at the heart of any hermeneutic or quasi-hermeneutic conception of records acquisition strategy, would be posed a crucial question: What is the nature of the text-context, or records-records creator, relationship?

Lately, this question has also become a focus of analytic concern for intellectual historians, some of whom have apparently reached the limit of their capacity to speak meaningfully about what might be called "historical consciousness" within the framework established by epistemic explanatory procedures and conventional historiography. New models of historical understanding, principally represented by hermeneutical procedures deriving from phenomenology, analytic philosophy and speech-act theory, deconstruction, and discourse analysis, are gradually replacing older traditional concepts, strategies, and canons of interpretation at the heart of the field of history. In many instances, the principal topoi of this new "historicism," notably the historicism of culture and literature, concern the debate surrounding the dimensions, meaning, and relation of context in reference to the archive of history — the evidence of records or texts or discourse. A new generation of scholars now hopes to authorize new ways of looking at texts, of inscribing texts within discourses, and of linking both text and discourse to their contexts, in order to probe more deeply into the archaeology of history.<sup>28</sup>



In a similar fashion, with the hypothesis and propositions of “records acquisition strategy,” archivists have also set themselves the task of authorizing a new way of appraising and selecting records for permanent preservation, of establishing the archive. We now mean to appraise records creators in the place of records, context in the place of text. Nevertheless, we have not yet engaged the critical question posed by the relationship of context and text, or records creator and records. For some reason, we prefer to immerse ourselves in the problem of process and procedure, rather than in the justification for selection and destruction; we continue to defer the problem to “another round.”

There is obviously no complete solution, but there may be certain analytic tactics and practical strategies which we might profitably employ. For one thing, in the case of the Canadian federal government bureaucracy, we have a formation of administrative structures which literally begs for “deconstruction.” This seemingly monolithic administrative complex produces both voluntarily and involuntarily a variety of texts and discourses on its operations and activities, many of which establish architectures of structure or para-structure which contravene conventionally accepted or intended monohierarchical models of bureaucratic organization. In fact, if we actually distil the sum of government information to its elemental sources, in the place of top-down vertical affinities and relations, we commonly find in physical and intellectual evidence sites or environments of records creation founded on linear-horizontal structural connections; functions of government either singly apprehended, or linked together by virtue of an operational process, and produced by cohesions of discourse (fonds, sous-fonds) and their constituent texts (records) which bear little or no relation to chain-of-command structure or system.

How can this knowledge of bureaucratic context in text, and the context derived from an epistemic knowledge of bureaucratic structure, be reconciled to support a macro-appraisal strategy for government records? Simply by readmitting the appraisal of texts (records) into its theoretical equation, by promoting the re-reading of government records as evidence of bureaucratic context, we may already have passed the first and most important hurdle. By actually encouraging and specifying an analytic format for its theoretical prosecution, however, we may well be on a firmer footing.

The key to this “analytic format,” I believe, resides first with the acceptance of the notion of records as narrative sources of context, and secondly, with the realization of the ‘narrativity’ of their formation, arrangement, organization, and inscription in discourses as a source of fonds. Throughout the preceding, I have frequently alluded or referred to “narrative discourse,” often in conjunction with the idea of an archival fonds. By the ‘narrativity’ of discourse, I mean an ontological assembly of texts, a metacode of shared textual reality, or a cohesion, convergence or unity of narrative (a fonds of records), in which an implicit understanding of a particular functional activity or structural formation is represented (context in text). This conception of narrative discourse as archival fonds offers a rather different perspective on the meaning and interpretation of provenance, and perhaps an alternative starting-point for macro-appraisal research. Instead of confining the delineation of a fonds to a provenance based on epistemic conceptions of structure (bureaucratic formations of organization disposed by their admitted administrative-organic continuity), it seeks out confirmation of records creators according to their discursive substance, in relation to a provenance

emerging from the 'narrativity' of texts and discourse periodically assembled into representations of structure or para-structure. In effect, the notion of discourse as fonds presumes a "hermeneutic moment," a setting of action in context; a reflexive relation between social structure and situated action the intelligibility of which is wholly determined by a context-dependence of meaning inscribed in the 'narrativity' of texts and discourse.<sup>29</sup> Potentially translated to a bureaucratic environment, this would presume the identification of records creators from evident or implicit messages encoded in records, principally the connections displayed by implication in function or process. Coincidentally, it would also expand their physical-intellectual boundaries to the termini of their narrative discourse by tracking and assembling texts into "contextual" fonds irrespective of their formal structural affinities.

We have encountered these context/text-dependent fonds before: the records created as a consequence of the horizontal, cross-cutting phenomena of bureaucratic function and process. They set up their own alternative environments of structure or para-structure, loci of provenance normally framed by inter-departmental or inter-agency (interactive) responses to tasks and problems, and frequently existing in counterpoint or opposition to the vertical physiology of bureaucratic mono-hierarchy and chain-of-command reporting linkages; their fonds, however transient in time and space, do not necessarily conform and often run counter to the fonds attributed to conventional structures of administrative-institutional organization; their provenance is para-structural, i.e., founded on modifications of formalized bureaucratic structural organization specified to facilitate function and process; it is task-and-problem oriented. For these para-structural records creators, context is primarily a matter of text — their narrative discourse creates the fonds.

The identification of records creators from discourse (records), and their inscription in context/text-dependent fonds, looms large on the horizon of records acquisition strategy. In fact, in its theoretical application to government information sources, the records acquisition strategy initiative of the National Archives of Canada, somewhat like its "documentation strategy" counterpart in the United States, proposes to concentrate its appraisal energy on a functional-processive analysis of bureaucratic administrations and institutions. Quite correctly, I think, it has been argued that the fonds created by interactive functions and processes of government, both in reference to their interpretation of national bureaucratic activity and their impression on civil society at large, would yield a high concentration of potentially significant archival records. It has even been suggested that we should attempt to treat certain functions and processes of government in a generic way, on the assumption that many federal government departments and agencies perform similar tasks and confront similar problems with conventionally similar orientations and responses. All of this is certainly possible, and perhaps inevitable.

I want to make one point abundantly clear, however, lest there be any temptation to confuse the identification of records creators from records (context-dependent fonds) with the notion of traditional, "bottom-up" records-centred appraisal. My principal purpose here is to recognize and establish the need to study patterns and formations of narrative discourse implicit in certain records as a source of context for records creators (the physiological and intellectual boundaries of their systemic and functional activities), and decidedly not to encourage a full-circle readmission of the "reading" of

the entire mass of available documentation in order to make item-related appraisal and selection decisions by virtue of previously apprehended conceptions of archival value, or to draw subjective conclusions on the archival significance of records as potential historical sources of national heritage at the documentary level. Rather, the object is both to increase our knowledge and perception of records creators and their interactive relations within the federal bureaucratic network, and to introduce a framework of analysis capable of decoding institutional-administrative identities in order more fully to understand the frequently para-structural (and *de facto*) reassignment of their provenance based on functional and processive linkages and affinities. Let me resume and restate the hypothesis of macro-appraisal strategy. This is an approach to records appraisal founded on a number of critical decisions and assumptions. First and foremost, it takes for granted the existence of macro or primary records acquisition targets. For example, the National Archives government records acquisition strategy is founded on and will proceed from the hypothesis that there are particular functional locations or environments of federal bureaucratic activity which are essential to document from an evidential-administrative or socio-historical perspective, are known previously or currently to have produced records of high archival value, or are considered to have the future potential to do so. In other words, on the basis of its present knowledge of the federal government, suspect at times, but yet reasonably informed, the National Archives has identified on a priority basis certain departments, agencies, and offices for records acquisition purposes. Having decided on the “targets” at the broadest levels, the National Archives takes the second step, which involves a research phase to confirm or alter its initial decisions, inaugurate an acquisition plan designed to deal with records creators at the strata of sous-fonds and documentary series, and to recalibrate priority agenda as required. It is precisely in this research phase that the quasi-hermeneutic concept of context-dependent fonds and the critical reading of records as narrative discourse can have a significant impact, principally by alerting archivists to homogeneities of texts and sub-texts (discourses) which nominate alternative functional and structural loci of bureaucratic activity not generally accounted for by the official rhetoric and representations of government. By learning to read (or re-read) records as sources of discourse (context) rather than as sources of value (information), archivists may profitably expand their “knowledgeability” about bureaucratic agency and structure.

Bearing this in mind, I want also to inject one final, cautionary note. To this point, the discussion of bureaucratic function and process has been entirely framed by reference to a structural environment or organizational configuration which rarely acknowledges para-structural presence, i.e., the activity of functional or processive records creators. Organization charts, administrative policy manuals, authority summaries, mandate statements, role and responsibility guidelines, all produced in abundance by federal government departments and agencies, commonly confine themselves to internal matters of policy and portfolio. Perhaps this is not surprising, given the jurisdictional foundation of our national government and the hierarchical nature of its reporting structure, the latter, it seems, lately organized around the control and allocation of financial resources, and the distribution of person-years. But clearly, if its literature is anything to judge by, “government” possesses a rather artificial knowledge or sense of itself; at least it does not appear to be formally conscious of how its internal interactive task and problem-solving mechanisms actually work, or more

importantly from an archival perspective, how its information is created, organized and distributed. To reiterate the point made above, we must be careful not to limit ourselves strictly to the standard summaries and official rhetoric found in bureaucratic relations as to the nature of its own organization and information complex. We must learn how to balance our knowledge of records creators between epistemic "creator information" and patterns of discourse evident in records, and ultimately, with our understanding of the interactive dimensions of the social environment.

With the inauguration of a records acquisition strategy, and primarily through the vehicle of its research agenda, archivists will now be attempting to acquire a greater or more accurate knowledge of government and its information network, in the reasonable expectation that this knowledge will enable a more competent and comprehensive appraisal and selection of its records. For many of the theoretical reasons outlined above, I believe that this endeavour ought to include "records analysis" as well as "records creator analysis." This contention rests on the assumption that many important records creators commonly exist in a contextual formation or environment of para-structure evoked by bureaucratic function and process, and furthermore, that the context of para-structure is largely derived from the 'narrativity' of its texts assembled together in discourse, i.e., the hermeneutic notion of context in text. Clearly, in para-structural instances of organizational formation, we must learn to read (or re-read) records as narrative discourse in order fully to understand the context of their creation and locate their fonds. In other, more familiar structural surroundings, the narrative discourse of their constituent records cannot but help to supplement the contextual knowledge to be gained through traditional epistemological lines of research.

At the National Archives of Canada, although much has been accomplished in terms of formulating strategic process and procedure, of establishing how archivists will implement records acquisition strategy (especially in the public sector), much yet remains to be decided as to the nature of its theoretical evolution and development. While the hypothesis of records acquisition strategy is very promising, and offers a welcome opportunity for archivists to regain control of records acquisition, fundamental questions concerning the concept of the archival fonds, the meaning of provenance, the utility of the record group concept, the primary focus of records appraisal, etc., have emerged (or re-emerged) for discussion, principally as a by-product of its practical introduction. This is extremely healthy from a professional perspective, and contributes much food for thought. Amid the clangour of debate, however, let us now re-establish the assessment and reading (appraisal) of records as one of the pillars on which is eventually mounted a strategic model for records acquisition. Let archivists savour and reflect upon the hermeneutic moment.

### Notes

- \* This essay represents an expanded version of a paper delivered at the Annual Conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists, Banff, Alberta, on 24 May 1991. Its tenor owes much to Professor Richard Cox of the University of Pittsburgh, whose insightful commentary on the presentation encouraged me to delve more deeply into the theoretical issues associated with records acquisition strategy. I especially wish to thank my colleagues at the National Archives of Canada: Terry Cook, Brien Brothman and Carl Vincent, for their constructive criticism of the drafts and general intellectual guidance. Any errors of commission or omission are, of course, entirely my own.
- 1 For the original statement and meaning of the "post-custodial era," see F. Gerald Ham, "Archival Strategies for the Post-Custodial Era," *The American Archivist*, 44 (Summer 1981), pp. 207-216.
- 2 I am specifically referring here to the new records acquisition strategy initiative of the National Archives

- of Canada. The substance and thrust of this institution's records appraisal intentions are summarized in its acquisition policy document, *National Archives of Canada Acquisition Strategy: A Development Plan, 1989-1993* (Ottawa, 1989), 102 pp.
- 3 According to Gerald Ham, "Archival Choices: Managing the Historical Record in an Age of Abundance," *The American Archivist*, 47 (Winter 1984), pp. 11-22, the sheer volume of records and information available for acquisition, combined with the increasing scarcity of resources, is forcing archivists to replace their essentially unplanned approach to archival preservation with a "systematic, planned, documented process of building, maintaining, and preserving collections," based on a concept of "collection management." For Ham, the essential elements of archival collection management consist of inter-institutional cooperation in collecting; disciplined and documented application of appraisal procedures; deaccessioning; pre-archival control of records; reducing records volume; and analysis and planning. On the notion of collection management, see also in the same issue, Jutta Reed-Scott, "Collection Management Strategies for Archivists," *The American Archivist*, 47 (Winter 1984), pp. 23-29.
  - 4 During the summer and autumn of 1990, the author represented the Government Archives Division on a panel of archivists charged by the National Archives to develop an analytic model for its Historical Resources Branch acquisition strategy initiative. The fruits of our endeavour are summarized in an in-house working group report, "Acquisition Strategy Research Plan" (National Archives of Canada, October 1990). The meetings of this group provided a rather special forum to test and debate various ideas and positions on the notion of acquisition strategy. I wish to thank my colleagues on the team, David Brown (Cartographic and Architectural Archives Division), Peter Robertson (Documentary Art and Photography Division), and Marianne McLean (Manuscript Division) for the benefit of their conceptual and analytic insights.
  - 5 The seminal statement of documentation strategy was made by Helen W. Samuels in her article, "Who Controls the Past," *The American Archivist*, 49 (Spring 1986), pp. 109-124. From its discursive debate and evolutionary formulation has emerged a rather extensive literature, including Philip N. Alexander and Helen W. Samuels, "The Roots of 128: A Hypothetical Documentation Strategy," *The American Archivist*, 50 (Fall 1987), pp. 518-531; Larry Hackman and Joan Warnow-Blewett, "The Documentation Strategy Process: A Model and Case Study," *The American Archivist*, 50 (Winter 1987), pp. 12-47; Richard J. Cox and Helen W. Samuels, "The Archivist's First Responsibility: A Research Agenda to Improve the Identification and Retention of Records of Enduring Value," *The American Archivist*, 51 (Winter and Spring 1988), pp. 28-46 (see also the ensuing commentaries of Frank Boles and Frank J. Burke in the same issue, pp. 47-51); and Richard J. Cox, "A Documentation Strategy Case Study: Western New York," *The American Archivist*, 52 (Spring 1989), pp. 192-200.
  - 6 The conference in question was the recent Association of Canadian Archivists meeting at Banff, Alberta, May 1991. Throughout the proceedings, it was evident that many considered "records acquisition strategy" to be synonymous with "documentation strategy," despite some considerable efforts (my own included) to distinguish one from the other.
  - 7 In fact, as it was originally conceived at the National Archives of Canada, there was to be a single strategy to embrace the acquisition of records in both the public and private sectors. This position has now fallen into disfavour: witness the recent forming of separate committees to cover government records acquisition and private records acquisition. On the government side, led by the Government Archives Division of the Historical Resources Branch and the Disposition and Evaluation Division of the Government Records Branch, and including input from other HRB media divisions involved in the acquisition of government records, there has recently emerged several signal "strategy papers" now approved by the National Archivist, including Terry Cook, *Government-Wide Plan for the Disposition of Records, 1991-1996* (National Archives of Canada, November 1990), and Sheila Powell and Dan Barney, *Report of the Multi-Year Records Disposition Plan Working Group* (National Archives of Canada, March 1991). The tenets of a macro-appraisal records acquisition strategy peculiar to government records are also very much in evidence in J.W. O'Brien, *Government Archives Division Appraisal Criteria* (National Archives of Canada, May 1990). Currently under discussion is a draft paper prepared by Terry Cook specifically for the guidance of Government Archives Division archivists in their application of functional macro-appraisal to government records fonds, "An Appraisal Methodology: Practical Approaches to Performing an Archival Appraisal" (Government Archives Division, October 1991). Significantly, however, there have been periodic exchanges of information and views between the public sector and private sector committees (the latter led by the Manuscript Division of HRB). It is expected—intended—that the public sector and private acquisition strategies will both complement and supplement one another.
  - 8 According to Gerald Ham, records "bulk," redundancy and impermanence are the principal factors contributing to the necessity of formulating strategies of collection management or records acquisition: "Archival Choices: Managing the Historical Record in an Age of Abundance," pp. 12-13.
  - 9 In fact, the notion of "complexity" has lately emerged as a prominent theme in writing on philosophy, literary theory and criticism, as well as shaping itself into a new discipline called the "science of complexity." The implications of the historicism and science of complexity for the archival profession, especially in relation to its capacity to understand and appraise information, is fulsomely explored by Brien Brothman in his intriguing essay, "Orders of Value: Probing the Theoretical Terms of Archival Practice," *Archivaria*, 32 (Summer 1991), pp. 78-100 (see especially note 30 for his analysis and critical assessment of the relevant literature).

- 10 See David Bearman, "Multisensory Data and Its Management"; "Authority Control Issues and Prospects," *The American Archivist*, 52 (Summer 1989), pp. 286-289; and especially his collaborative article with Richard H. Lytle, "The Power of the Principle of Provenance," *Archivaria* 21 (Winter 1985-86), pp. 14-27, passages of which have been paraphrased in the text. While Bearman's (and Lytle's) remarks are more or less confined to archival description and information retrieval, their application to records appraisal is perfectly obvious, as signalled by Terry Cook, "Leaving Safe and Accustomed Ground: Ideas for Archivists," *Archivaria*, 23 (Winter 1986-87), pp. 124-125.
- 11 As suggested by Michael A. Lutzker in his stimulating essay, "Max Weber and the Analysis of Modern Bureaucratic Organization: Notes Towards a Theory of Appraisal," *The American Archivist*, 45 (Spring 1982), pp. 119-130, Weber's structural theory of bureaucracy continues to hold merit for and have relevance to the archival appraisal of institutional or operational records. It offers a legitimate conceptual framework of analysis to a profession which has been many times criticized for its lack of theoretical perspective. Significantly, however, he concludes by noting that the "working models" we develop will necessarily have to be refined "as we discover the informal networks not accounted for in the organizational hierarchy" of Weber's structural paradigm.
- 12 These are the principles forming the cornerstone of the National Archives acquisition strategy for government records, as specified in the *Government-Wide Plan for the Disposition of Records, 1991-1996* and the *Multi-Year Records Disposition Plan*.
- 13 The seminal study is by Terry Cook, *The Archival Appraisal of Records Containing Personal Information: A RAMP Study With Guidelines* (Paris, [forthcoming]), from which I have also borrowed his definition and categorization of "case files" (pp. 19-20). For his latest thinking on this matter, see "Many are called but few are chosen": Appraisal Guidelines for Sampling and Selecting Case Files," *Archivaria*, 32 (Summer 1991), pp. 25-50.
- 14 It is important to note, however, that the macro-appraisal approach of records acquisition strategy previews a "first-cut" form of subject file selection simply by placing certain records creators on the acquisition agenda and eliminating those of lesser consequence, including any relevant subject file series.
- 15 The most recent statement of the theory of structuration is found in Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge, 1984), esp. chaps. 1 and 6. For the evolution of this theory, as well as a more detailed discussion of its basic concepts, see Anthony Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method* (Berkeley, 1982), chaps. 2-3; *Central Problems in Social Theory* (Berkeley, 1979); and *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, Vol. 1 (Berkeley, 1981), chaps. 1-2.
- 16 Hans Booms, "Society and the Formation of a Documentary Heritage: Issues in the Appraisal of Archival Sources," translated by Hermina Joldersma and Richard Klumpenhauer, *Archivaria* 24 (Summer 1987), pp. 69-107.
- 17 Cook's notion of societal dynamics expressed through the metaphor of image, and its potential linking to an appraisal model based on citizen-state interaction, is discussed at length in his RAMP Study, *The Archival Appraisal of Records Containing Personal Information: A RAMP Study with Guidelines*, pp. 40-50. This includes an assessment of Siegfried Büttner's discussion paper, "The Appraisal of Public Records Containing Personal Data: An Essay on an Unsolved Problem," which was presented at a meeting of an "experts group" of the International Council of Archives in Koblenz, Germany, in March 1989 (which Cook attended as Canada's representative and session "reporter"), and from which I have inevitably drawn my summary. His most recent thinking on social theory and its relation to the development of archival paradigms is found in Terry Cook, "Mind Over Matter: Towards a New Theory of Archival Appraisal," in the Association of Canadian Archivists' *Festschrift* for Hugh Taylor [forthcoming, 1992], and in Terry Cook, *The Concept of the Archival Fonds*, Bureau of Canadian Archivists, Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards (Ottawa, [forthcoming 1992]). I am greatly indebted to the author for his permission to examine the manuscripts of these essays prior to their publication.
- 18 For confirmation of this point, see the excellent and highly accessible collection of interpretive essays on contemporary philosophy and social theory edited with an introduction by Quentin Skinner, *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences* (Cambridge, 1985). As will be readily apparent, my own thinking on this matter has been profoundly influenced by the writing of Michel Foucault, particularly his work on the formation and meaning of discourse in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York, 1972). In addition, the views expressed below owe much to the insights of Hayden White on discourse analysis, literary criticism, and historical philosophy, especially the observations and insights offered in his brilliant collection of essays, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, 1987).
- 19 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 72.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- 21 As indicated in the *Government-Wide Plan for the Disposition of Records, 1991-1996*, pp. 6-8.
- 22 Paul Marsden, "Acquiring Electronic Records of TNO - Archival Processing of Electronic Records," *Machine Readable Records Bulletin*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (1991), p.2.
- 23 A rather convincing case for abandoning the "record group concept" is offered by Terry Cook, *The Concept of the Archival Fonds*, pp. 17-20, where he rightly points out the many difficulties and absurdities associated with squeezing modern administrative-bureaucratic complexity into mono-hierarchical paradigms of organization. See also on this point, Peter Scott, "The Record Group Concept: A Case for

- Abandonment," *The American Archivist*, 29 (October 1966), pp. 493-504; "Facing the Reality of Administrative Change - Some Further Remarks on the Record Group Concept," *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 5 (October 1974), pp. 94-100; and David A. Bearman and Richard H. Lytle, "The Power of the Principle of Provenance," pp. 14-27. While I am essentially in agreement with this view, I am equally loath to abandon the record group concept until we know more about what we mean by archival fonds in reference to the notion of bureaucratic function and process, and (from a practical perspective), who the records creators are and where they are situated in the institutional complex. Nor am I sure that we have fully explored the notion of "flexibility" as applied to the conceptual meaning of the record group by Carl Vincent in his seminal text, "The Record Group: A Concept in Evolution," *Archivaria*, 3 (Winter 1976-77), pp. 3-16. By retaining the record group and boosting the power of its provenance, we perhaps have only gained temporary relief, but also the opportunity to complete our research and analysis.
- 24 See for example, Luciana Duranti, "Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science," in *Archivaria*, 28 (Summer 1989), pp. 7-27; 29 (Winter 1989-90), pp. 4-17; 30 (Summer 1990), pp. 4-20; 31 (Winter 1990-91), pp. 10-25; 32 (Summer 1991), pp. 6-24. Duranti reminds us how the exercise of interpreting intentionality and intelligibility (persona, structure) can help archivists formulate an understanding of the action (context) "in which a document participates": 32 (Summer 1991), p. 21. Indeed, there are important practical messages here for archivists intending to explore the discursive dimension of texts through the acts of formation, construction and production. Unfortunately, however, not only does Duranti overestimate the power of individual intentionality and being, as opposed to social and discursive determination (Brothman, "Orders of Value: Probing the Theoretical Terms of Archival Practice," p. 96) but, in viewing the documentary world as a "system" built entirely on elements of order internal to a document's creative moment (transaction, representation and meaning), and its formal 'external' typological "consistency" within predicted boundaries or systemic "cohesions" (blocks), her analysis ultimately urges us to focus our appraisal on individual documents rather than on tiers or fonds of records.
- 25 This of course runs counter to the "thick" contextualist approach to meaning and interpretation proposed by Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (London, 1975), pp. 7, 14, 449; Quentin Skinner, *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Vol. I, "The Renaissance", xii-xiv; and D.M. Schneider, "Notes Towards a Theory of Culture," in K.H. Basso and H.A. Selby, eds., *Meaning in Anthropology* (Albuquerque, N.M., 1976), pp. 214: "all meaning is to some degree context-defined or context-determined."
- 26 This is my archival adaptation-interpretation of Michel Foucault's sense of "discourse" running through chapters six, "The Formation of Strategies," and seven, "Remarks and Consequences," of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, pp. 64-76 (see especially p. 76).
- 27 Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*: "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," pp. 1-25; "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," pp. 26-57.
- 28 As discussed by White, op. cit.: "The Context in the Text: Method and Ideology in Intellectual History," pp. 185-213. The crucial text in this regard is the collection of essays edited by Dominick LaCapra and Stephen L. Kaplan, *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives* (Ithaca, NY, 1982).
- 29 Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, pp. 327-334; Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, pp. 71-76.